



Supporting Youth Engagement in Case Planning

MARCH 2020

LIFE

Youth in foster care face trauma, exploitation, and other disadvantages disproportionate to their peers who don't come into contact with the child welfare system. These disadvantages occur in every stage of involvement (pre-care, while in care, and out-of-care), with many youth experiencing the same traumas during their stays in foster care as those that brought them to the child welfare system, including abandonment, sexual abuse, physical abuse, and emotional abuse (Riebschleger, Day, & Damashek, 2015).

OPPRESSION AND MARGINALIZATION IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

The root cause of these disadvantages for youth in foster care relate to oppression and marginalization within the very system that seeks to protect them. Some child welfare scholars have asserted that youth in foster care experience exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (Bruskas, 2008; Snow, 2006). These are five categories of oppression, which is defined as “systemic constraints on groups that are not necessarily the result of the intentions of a tyrant” but “often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms—in short, the normal processes of everyday life” (Young, 1990, pg. 41). Furthermore, while explaining the injustice of cultural imperialism, Young explains “... that the oppressed group’s experience and interpretation of social life finds no expression that touches the dominant culture, while that same culture imposes on the oppressed group its experience and interpretation of social life” (pg. 60). Lack of voice in the oppressed and a concurrent inability of the powerful to understand their experiences works to reinforce and even justify the oppression.

THE ROLE OF YOUTH VOICE

There is a growing movement to ensure youth voice is included in decisions about their lives and futures but, as with many social movements, the actual implementation lies on a spectrum of understanding, skill, support, and power (e.g., Yang & Ortega, 2016). The call for youth voice and inclusion in decision-making provides the child welfare field with an imperative, but with little direction for navigating the complexity of the task.

Child welfare workers are asked to act in the youth's best interest, but chronic resource scarcity and good intentions (e.g., sparing youth from being re-traumatized) can drive caseworkers to reinforce the power dynamic by making decisions for youth and effectively erasing their voice (e.g., Darlington, Healy, & Feeney, 2010). In addition, integrating youth voice into case planning is not as simple as asking them what they want. Spyrou (2011, pg.152) asserts that youth "voices are constantly constrained and shaped by multiple factors such as our own assumptions about children, our particular use of language, the institutional contexts in which we operate and the overall ideological and discursive climates which prevail."

Child welfare is an exceptionally challenging landscape to carry out imperatives around youth voice, especially in the absence of the acknowledgement and analysis of the power dynamics that so forcefully shape youths' experience.

LEVERAGING INTENSIVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Oregon's Title IV-E Waiver demonstration project, Leveraging Intensive Family Engagement (LIFE)¹ named "parent-directed, youth-guided" as one of its practice values. As part of the evaluation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 31 youth aged 10 and older. A Youth Advisory Board (YAB) was convened to guide the evaluation of LIFE services and help ensure that youth experiences were better understood. The YAB consisted of former and transitioning foster youth aged 16 to 28 years old and guided evaluation activities for four years. Five YAB members were hired as Research Assistants in the final year of the evaluation. All youth interviews were first content analyzed by the Evaluation Team, and then YAB Researchers re-analyzed 16 interviews using the lens of their lived experience. The emergent themes through each process are described below.

¹ Oregon Department of Human Services-Child Welfare (DHS-CW) developed an intervention focused on reducing the time to permanency for children likely to have long-term stays in foster care. Leveraging Intensive Family Engagement (LIFE) has four key components: monthly case planning meetings, enhanced family finding, peer parent mentoring, and team collaboration. LIFE staff include a trained meeting facilitator, administrative support staff, and a paid peer parent mentor. The LIFE practice values are strengths-based, trauma-informed, parent-directed/ youth-guided, and culturally responsive.

CONTENT ANALYSIS: SUPPORTS FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Youth reported a wide range of opinions about, experiences with, and levels and quality of participation in, LIFE services. **Of key importance was the extent to which youth were able to identify and express their needs, and the Team’s responsiveness and ability to meet those needs.**

Three factors were consistently related to youths’ attendance and participation in meetings:

1. relationship/connection
2. meeting informational needs, and
3. youth voice/youth-guidance.



Relationship/Connection. Youth were more likely to participate in LIFE meetings if they had a connection or relationship with one or more people attending. Youth often attended meetings due to at least one trusted individual (e.g., relative, caseworker, meeting facilitator, foster parent) encouraging them to attend, describing what happens at meetings, and generally helping the youth feel more comfortable. Counselors, therapists, and CASAs were often mentioned as people who were advocates or allies (“on my side”) for youth in meetings.

“I just have a group of people that I know personally, that I have known for some time now. So I don’t mind. It is not just a complete group of strangers that I barely know. . .but I feel comfortable with them so I don’t really mind talking about stuff with them.”

“She (CASA) is just there for me, kind of. She is there and to be there for the meeting and if I’m uncomfortable saying something, she offers to say it for me.”

LIFE meetings were also a chance for youth to **see their siblings or other family members.**

Meeting Information Needs. Some youth had a **strong interest in knowing** what was going on in their case. As one youth put it, “I like knowing what’s happening so I like being there.” Meeting youth’s need for information encouraged their participation in LIFE meetings.

“I want to be there because I am the child that is in foster care and I want to know what’s going on, instead of just being outside of the box and not knowing what is going on. I want to be inside of the box and know.”

Youth talked about it being **helpful to meet with a team** – it was easier to have everyone together face to face, where information and ideas were shared, resulting in better problem solving and more timely decision making.

“[LIFE meetings are] very useful. It gets you on a plan, makes you more aware of what’s happening, gets everyone together so they are in the room discussing stuff. It just feels better to have everyone at once instead of going individually to talk to people. Everyone gets the picture and the idea all at once.”

When information needs were not met, youth experienced LIFE meetings as tedious, repetitive, uninformative, and pointless. Some youth described meetings as **too parent-focused**; they felt the meeting was not relevant to them.

“So, I don’t go anymore because...the meetings were very parent-centered. ...and on top of that it was the same thing every time. It was all about Mom and it was super irritating. I am being dragged out of school, where I want to be. My grades started to drop because I had to leave the same class every month... We would go and it would be mom, mom, mom. OK, now let’s talk about the kids for the last 15 minutes. I was, ‘I don’t care about what she’s doing.’ I thought it was going to center around us and how we were feeling. And what we need. It is more revolving around my mom.

Youth Voice, Youth-guided. With the expressed value of being youth-guided, LIFE services focused on creating space for youth to have voice, input, or, at the very least, the opportunity to talk. Again, youth reported a wide range of experience.

The **presence of the LIFE Team** was helpful in facilitating youth voice, either by the team witnessing what a youth had to say, for instance to a parent, or by assisting with communication between a youth and a caseworker.

“I got to actually in front of people inform my mom that I want her to get better... It is cool because I got to say it to her face, instead of over the phone or text message, or going through somebody else. It is more impactful.”

“In my opinion, they just help communicate with my caseworker, what I actually want to do. Because sometimes my caseworker doesn’t really understand when I talk to her just by myself.”

And some youth described the advantages of **meeting with a team** for being heard and getting needs met.

“I feel that they actually listen. Especially when we are all in the meetings. So actually hearing what we have to say, they can put it into action. It is easier for them.

“It is nice to get with everybody, especially when I need something. Everyone is there and I can tell them all straight up that I need that so they all work on it. That is pretty helpful.”

In addition, an area in which LIFE seemed to support youth quite effectively was in providing **choice related to permanency options** after their permanency goal shifted away from reunification to the concurrent plan. Youth who were at this point in their case often reported having a positive experience with LIFE staff and in meetings where they could explore options, receive information, and have a say about their future. A few youth were conflicted or unclear about what they wanted for permanency and delayed making a decision, or they were afraid of hurting someone’s feelings with their decision. It could also be frustrating for younger youth who had no identified resources for satisfactory long-term permanency and were still too young for independent living (ILP) services. These youth felt the system had no viable options for them, and sometimes ran away in an attempt to retain some sense of control over their life.

THROUGH THE LENS OF LIVED EXPERIENCE: COMPLICATING OUR UNDERSTANDING

The Evaluation Team’s ability to fully represent the voices of child welfare-involved youth interviewees is limited. Incorporating voice, by interviewing youth, does not automatically empower them; rather, there has to be an acknowledgement and analysis of how power dynamics shape, distort, or mute what youth in foster care say and their abilities to express themselves (Nybell, 2013). As Spyrou (2011) stated, “The social, political and historical contexts that shape life in general also shape the entire research process from start to finish. What gets researched, when, how and why are all key questions that need to be asked of every piece of produced research by reflexive researchers who seek to challenge the taken-for-granted in the production of knowledge about children and childhood.”

YAB Researchers analyzed the youth interviews through the lens of their own lived experience in foster care. Though they pointed out many of the positive experiences described by youth, YAB Researchers also shared some of the consequences of feeling disempowered, including an inability to share real feelings and needs, particularly with anyone perceived as having power over you. Four themes emerged from their re-analysis: (1) youth in foster care are good at adapting to their surroundings, (2) interpreting behavior needs to be done thoughtfully and with empathy, (3) relationships are key, and (4) using only one approach to engage youth is not enough.

Youth are good at adapting to their surroundings. According to YAB Researchers, youth in foster care often learn how to adapt to their surroundings at an early age. They learn to do it with their parents (who may be unpredictable), their foster families (foster youth are expected to assimilate to their values and mores), and even their caseworkers (sometimes having multiple of these powerful people who can both provide reassurance and take it away). Navigating such instability and being expected to meet the needs of everyone around you adds to the confusion of such formative years, leaving them to question what they really want and instead focusing on what they think others want. YAB Researchers identified this dynamic as **code-switching**, in that youth might say what they think is “correct” or what they think someone wants to hear, rather than what they really want or feel. This can happen without anyone being aware they are doing so.

This concept was exemplified in an interview with a youth, “Lorna”, who shared a positive experience early in their child welfare case, but in their follow-up interview 14 months later, they had given up on the service and gone on the run. In Lorna’s first interview, they described the Family Engagement Facilitator (FEF) putting the responsibility of case movement on the youth and their mother. One YAB Researcher pointed out that putting the youth in a position of having to act like an adult created an environment where the youth would code-switch, or act like an adult. In turn, the YAB Researcher explained, this limited the youth’s ability to express—or maybe even recognize – what they really wanted. Consequently, when Lorna was asked in the second interview if there was anything LIFE staff could have done to keep them from going on the run, they responded:

“No, because they didn’t know everything that was going on. So there was no way to prevent what was happening, especially when it didn’t have nothing to do with y’all...”

In another example from their first interview, the exchange between interviewer and Lorna was:

INTERVIEWER:

Was your mom there,
your biological mom?

RESPONSE:

“Yes, ma’am.”

INTERVIEWER:

You said a lot was accomplished.

RESPONSE:

“Yeah, so I wanted to talk about certain things like boundaries, rules, where is my case going, how are we doing on my case.”

A YAB Researcher explained that Lorna was transforming into “the good youth” that the system wants to see and that this may not have been a full presentation of them. Another YAB Researcher, who is Latinx, further explained that Lorna, who is African American, may not have wanted to be seen as an “angry black girl.” By Lorna’s second interview, she was no longer willing to code-switch:

“I was rolling with what they wanted at first, doing the foster homes, trying to do good in school and all of that. But that didn’t work, not for me. ... Not for what they had in mind.”

This necessarily complicates the understanding of youth voice for practitioners and researchers alike. As one YAB Researcher explained, “...*they might have answered differently if the interviewer had been someone they trusted.*” Separately, another YAB Researcher shared, “*I wouldn’t have been honest with someone I barely knew—especially someone who knew my caseworker.*”

In another interview, another YAB Researcher identified code-switching when a youth described getting “*ambushed*” in a LIFE meeting for a particular behavior. When the interviewer asked if they felt that was a good way for their LIFE Team to handle the issue, the youth interviewee said yes, and explained that they had learned their lesson. However, the YAB Researchers questioned the youth’s response,

“[They] might be afraid someone will tell [their] caseworker and they’ll get moved. If you’re a foster youth that hasn’t been moved around a lot, then you really fear that instability.”

Adults focus on behavior rather than working to understand the underlying

unmet need. According to YAB Researchers, youth in foster care struggle with identifying and sharing their true wants and needs because adults focus on, appraise, and react to youth behavior rather than trying to discover the unmet needs driving the behavior. As one YAB Researcher put it, *“Don’t judge the behavior, find out the need that is causing the behavior”*. Another YAB Researcher stated, *“We’re angry. We’re not very good at controlling that anger. But adults are not very good at seeing beyond that anger.”*

It’s relatively easy to understand how unmet needs can lead a youth to run away or disengage from school or social activities. A more complex story may exist for youth who are engaged and participating in services. The YAB Researchers explained that what looks like engagement can also be the youth’s way of organizing the system around them, an act of self-preservation. In one interview, for example, a youth switched between using “Mom” to refer to both their biological mom and their foster mom. One might interpret this youth’s behavior as loving their foster mom when the youth’s behavior could have been about surviving in foster care and pleasing their foster mom. One of the YAB Researchers explained that the yearn for stability is so strong that foster youth quickly figure out ways to pull in those around them. YAB Researchers describe this as a way to regain control and ensure they will have support when they need it, thereby creating hope and comfort.

Focusing on the behavior without an understanding of the needs behind the behavior can lead adults to the wrong conclusion. As seen with Lorna, the consequence can be a team of supporters that don’t understand what the youth wants or needs and, in turn, cannot anticipate or prevent an attempt to take back control such as running away.

As shared previously, Lorna’s LIFE Team didn’t know what was going on and Lorna didn’t want to be “*mean*” by telling them how they really felt:

“...what they had for me wasn’t what I wanted and I was ready to do my own thing and branch off. I had been in their care, some good, some bad... I wasn’t interested anymore, honestly. I didn’t just want to come in here and say it to them, because that is kind of mean, but over time, you understand.”

As another example, youth who attended LIFE meetings often said they did so because they wanted to know what was going on with their case. However, youth who did not attend meetings also wanted to know what was going on with their case. YAB Researchers pointed out that youth may not demonstrate or have an interest in participating in their family's child welfare case, especially early on when they may be experiencing "*their first opportunity to focus on themselves.*" Youth rejecting the opportunity to participate in case planning meetings because they "*just want to be a kid*" and may "*still have hope [their] parents will get it together*" may, to many adults, appear as disengagement. YAB Researchers insisted that despite the seeming disinterest, youth should still be informed about what's going on and asked for input. In fact, early in the case is a good time for caseworkers to begin building their relationship with the youth and demonstrating their interest. As one YAB Researcher explained, "*'I don't care' can actually mean, 'Do I really have a choice?'*"

Understanding is co-created and relationships are required. The YAB Researchers made it clear that relationships are key to creating a shared understanding of what youth want and need. YAB Researchers noted that lacking an understanding of the youth as an individual can lead people to "*blame all misbehavior on trauma when most of it's normal.*" Foster youth get labeled as "broken" and treated like someone who needs to be fixed when what they yearn for is normalcy. YAB Researchers pointed out a good example of how to respond to behavior. The interviewee said they were called out during a meeting for something they had done wrong. Their FEF responded by asking everyone in the room to share if they had done something similar when they were young and everyone had similar stories of their own teenage misbehavior. The youth interviewee shared:

"It just made me feel more close to them, and okay, they did something like me, so... they opened up to me so I thought I might as well open up to them too."

The YAB Researchers explained that rather than focusing on the behavior, the FEF was able to bring the focus to the youth's needs. To do this well, a relationship was required. This takes time which, YAB Researchers keenly understood, is a scarce resource for caseworkers. Coupled with an unrelenting push for permanency and case closure, relationships that develop between youth and their caseworkers can feel contrived and ineffective, if not non-existent or downright bad. Without a meaningful connection, caseworkers can misinterpret behavior and approach youth in a manner that doesn't align with the youth's needs.

For example, Lorna, who presented as a very independent youth (whether code-switching or not), described feeling frustrated when their questions weren't answered:

“I hear it all. I hear whatever, ‘come work with me’. Well, ‘what do you want to do [Lorna]’? That is the question I get, but the answers you are giving me are not—I’m not going to say up to my standards as if I am up there or something, but you are not answering my question to the full extent of my understanding. No.”

YAB Researchers interpreted this as Lorna's LIFE Team seeing their independent behavior and assuming they didn't need support. YAB Researchers explained that youth don't always have clear questions because they don't know what's possible. Relationships with youth can help prevent misunderstandings that impede the team's ability to meet the youth's needs.

Furthermore, YAB Researchers contrasted Lorna's experience with another youth, 'Jay', who self-described as shy and quiet, but thought all of their questions were answered clearly. In fact, Jay described a number of times when they were asked, *How are you doing? What are you struggling with? Is there anything we should know?* YAB Researchers wondered if there was a greater attempt to understand Jay because they were shy and perhaps seen as less independent than Lorna and in need of more support.

One approach to engaging youth will not work for all youth. As YAB Researchers pointed out, there is no checklist for working with human beings. In particular, practitioners need to have different approaches to engagement and relationship building. As well, YAB Researchers explained that, even though foster youth are good at adapting to their surroundings, youth-centered practice does not mean inviting youth to join adult-centered activities. Youth engagement approaches are not the same as those used with adults. Furthermore, the idea of 'youth voice' is much more complex than just asking them to speak.

Some youth interviewees shared that they enjoyed meetings and found them helpful; however, a YAB Researcher suggested that meetings may not support all youth communication styles. To some youth, adult-focused meetings are one more situation they are forced to navigate. YAB Researchers explained that practitioners should be responsive to youth by using active listening skills and consistently responding to their needs. As a YAB Researcher shared,

“this can be as simple as demonstrating care by texting the youth after the meeting to see how it went.”

YAB Researchers also highlighted inauthentic efforts to engage youth. Practitioners seem to understand the importance of asking youth what they want but, as one YAB Researcher explained, *“People want youth to have a voice, but not that voice.”* For example, two youth interviewees said they wanted to connect with family members that had been identified but were not supported by the LIFE Team. One of the youth interviewees shared, *“I am going to have to say what I am going to say if I want what I want. I can’t really be heard if I’m not talking.”* It seems this youth wouldn’t have trouble speaking their mind; however, when asked about visiting their relatives, the youth explained:

“I asked...they said that they would do something at the LIFE meetings, but it didn’t really happen... It kind of happened, but then they tell me to call them. They gave me the numbers of people, and I don’t want to just call out of nowhere and start talking with them. That’s weird.”

This 13-year old’s voice was heard but as a YAB Researcher explained, *“The meeting topics just don’t seem to be centered around what the youth want...[and]... the way they are supporting the youth is questionable—like just giving them the [relatives’] number and saying ‘call her’—like?”*

In their final overall reflections, a YAB Researcher shared:

“Many times youth are getting to talk, but their input is overlooked or not taken serious. It’s important to treat the youth as an equal in the room, and that what they are saying matters. Just because you’re letting the youth talk isn’t enough, they need to be taken seriously.”

In a memorandum released in August 2019 (Information Memorandum, ACYF-CB-IM-19-03) by the Administration for Children and Families, the relationship between voice and power is acknowledged. The Children’s Bureau describes the importance of getting the youth (and family) voice in case planning in order to:

Empower families and youth involved with the system to determine service needs to expedite reunification or other permanent, family-based solutions.

Our work with YAB Researchers supports this idea but suggests that ‘voice’ is not as simple as just asking youth what they want. The reanalysis of a subset of youth interviews, through the lens of lived experience, sheds light on how power dynamics inherent in the child welfare system fundamentally alter how youth approach relationships with adults. Findings suggest there are key things practitioners can do to support youth engagement in case planning and the inclusion of youth voice:

1. Recognize that youth engagement does not mirror adult engagement.
2. Ensure there is at least one trusted adult who knows the youth and can support them by listening, co-creating meaning and understanding, and facilitating a response to their wants and needs.
3. Start by including youth and asking them what they want, but know that youth voice unfolds over time through relationships with caring adults.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express deep appreciation for the LIFE Youth Advisory Board: Anthony Abshire, Joshua Cunningham, Ashley Dupee, Maddy Langan, Jini Tabani, and Anonymous.

And a special thanks to Ashley Dupee for contributing to writing this issue brief.

RESOURCES

Bruskas, D. (2008). Children in foster care: A vulnerable population at risk. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 21(2), 70-77.

Darlington, Y., Healy, K., Feeney, J.A. (2010). Challenges in Implementing Participatory Practice in Child Protection: A Contingency Approach. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 32, 1020-1027.

Nybell, Lynn M. (2013). Locating “youth voice.” Considering the contexts of speaking in child welfare. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35, 1227-1235.

Riebschleger, J., Day, A., & Damashek, A. (2015). Foster care youth share stories of trauma before, during, and after placement: Youth voices for building trauma-informed systems of care. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 24(4), 339-360.

Snow, K. (2006). Vulnerable citizens: The oppression of children in care. *Journal of Child and Youth Care Work*, 21, 94-113.

Spyrou, Spyros. (2011). The limits of children’s voices: From authenticity to critical, reflexive representation. *Childhood*, 18(2), 151-165.

Yang, Jessica L., & Ortega, Debora. (2016). Bureaucratic Neglect and Oppression in Child Welfare: Historical Precedent and Implications for Current Practice. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 33, 513-521.

Young, I. (1990). *Justice and the politics of difference* (Vol. 1). New Jersey: Princeton University Press

Developed by the Center for the Improvement of Child & Family Services in partnership with the Oregon Department of Human Services-Child Welfare as part of the Leveraging Intensive Family Engagement (LIFE) Title IV-Waiver Demonstration Project March 2020

Learn more at www.pdx.edu/ccf/child-welfare | Contact: Christine Cooper, ccooper@pdx.edu