



STRATEGY BRIEF

SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES

How can agencies and organizations **prepare for authentic youth engagement?**

Youth engagement gives young adults currently or formerly impacted by the child welfare system a voice and informs systems to improve services for youth. Done well, [youth engagement embraces a spirit of co-design](#), and can result in better organizational decision-making and greater equity. However, if the engagement lacks authenticity and adults are unwilling to share their power, these efforts can fail to achieve their goals and, at worst, may do more harm than good.

When seeking the voices and perspectives of youth with lived experience, agencies and organizations should expect to spend time preparing the youth for their work. It is equally important for agencies to take time to prepare themselves before taking steps to connect with youth participants.

This brief offers some questions for agencies to consider before undertaking a new youth engagement effort or when making changes to an existing approach. It also illustrates effective power sharing and offers examples from agencies with successful youth engagement strategies.

This brief is the first in a three-part series on youth engagement values and approaches, developed in partnership with experienced youth and family advocates from [Family Voices United](#),^{1,2} a collaborative project among Casey



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Family Programs, [Children's Trust Fund Alliance](#), [FosterClub](#), and [Generations United](#). Other briefs in the series include:

- [What are some best practices for recruiting and working with youth advisory boards?](#)
- [What does it mean to value youth partners as assets?](#)

Preparing the agency

Cristal Ramirez, youth engagement manager at the National Association of Counsel for Children, suggests that agencies first [“pause and consider the ‘why’ of youth engagement.”](#) This includes assessing both the agency's motive — what it hopes to gain from the engagement — as well as its level of commitment to doing so authentically and meaningfully.

Are leaders at all levels truly prepared to listen to youth feedback and make changes in response to their recommendations? Answering “yes” unequivocally to this question is an essential prerequisite for authentic engagement. Other questions to consider:

Where will the youth engagement take place?

Youth participants on an advisory or advocacy board that is independent from and external to the agency (supported by a community partner, for example) may feel more free to speak their minds. On the other hand, locating an advisory group internally can help hold the agency accountable to recommendations for change, particularly if the entity is centrally connected to the agency's Continuous Quality Improvement process.

What roles will youth play?

There are a broad range of possible youth engagement opportunities and roles. [Advisory boards or councils](#) are a popular choice. Others include peer mentoring, professional internships, reviewing grant or award applications, participating on hiring teams, sharing personal experiences on a panel, writing an op-ed, paid staff positions, and other opportunities that demonstrate the value of [youth partners as assets](#). Offering lower barrier-to-entry opportunities (such as one-time activities) in addition to those requiring a longer commitment can help increase the diversity of youth who participate.

Which youth will be engaged?

Diversity is critical to effective youth engagement. However, if the effort is new, agencies might consider beginning with a cohort of older youth/young adults who may have more experience, support networks, and emotional resilience. Ask for their involvement in planning the details of the youth engagement strategy as their feedback may prevent or quickly correct missteps that otherwise would undermine the agency's goals and, more importantly, could cause harm to less experienced, more vulnerable youth advocates.

What is the budget for youth engagement?

Youth are experts in their own experience, and their knowledge and expertise are essential to improve the child welfare system. They should be compensated in the same manner as other subject matter experts, including hourly or daily stipends and reimbursement for travel costs and meals. Additional expenses for youth may be compensated to reduce barriers to

Youth are going to decide whether they want to work with you or not. The approach you take matters a lot. Let youth know this is their forum. If it's not about their voices, youth won't keep coming. It's not authentic engagement and advocacy if they're only saying what you want them to say, not what they want to say.

— MARIA BATISTA,
PEER SPECIALIST, FLORIDA YOUTH SHINE

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about their families and childhood in a professional setting? Instead, recognize that youth advisors and advocates can speak from their experience without talking about what happened to them.

Make sure youth know they always can say “No.”

Sharing power means that the adults don't always determine the agenda. Some agencies ask staff to make formal requests for youth involvement. Staff members must describe the proposed project, expected activities, deliverables, and timelines, and consider how the youth advisors will be compensated and recognized for their work. Youth then are better prepared to make informed decisions about whether they want to participate and what they want to work on.

Be transparent about how youth input will be used.

Agencies also must be clear about who will be hearing what youth share, particularly if personal stories and images may be used. It is critical to ensure that youth currently involved with the system have commitments and reassurances from agencies and their contract providers that they will be safe from retaliation for speaking out about problems they see and changes they recommend. Spelling out exactly who will be making the final decision on youth recommendations and why, and repeating this information often, will help manage expectations and help youth feel safe and supported.

Close the loop.

Timely follow up on the feedback that youth provide is an essential component of youth engagement. If a recommendation cannot be implemented, explain why. Doing so shows respect and builds trust. Megan Tribble, director of youth engagement at [Foster Success](#) in Indiana, says: “As youth are working in different work groups, we make sure we are going back and telling them what happened with their recommendations. That has created a lot of self-confidence and self-efficacy, and a feeling of, ‘Wow. What I said really mattered.’”

Examples

The [National Association of Counsel for Children](#) (NACC) created its [National Advisory Council for Children's Legal Representation](#) to help center the perspectives and priorities of people with lived experience in all the organization's work and planning. Created in 2020 as the National Youth Advisory Board, the group selected its own name in August 2021 to better reflect its role. The National Advisory Council advises NACC's board of directors, provides guidance to NACC staff in all departments, and helps the organization pursue its mission and core strategies. In one recent legal advocacy campaign, two National Advisory Council members were included on the campaign's national advisory committee. Another member wrote an Op-Ed that was published in two influential newspapers, and another submitted testimony to the legislature in a target state. When NACC hired a communications manager, another National Advisory Council

Engagement has to include accountability and transparency up front. Let youth know how you are going to use their information or conversation. That way, youth know what they are signing up for. When the project is over, they won't be disappointed by what was done with the information.

— RYAN YOUNG,

ALUMNUS OF FOSTER CARE, ARIZONA DEPARTMENT OF CHILD SAFETY YOUTH EMPOWERMENT COUNCIL PRESIDENT

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member participated in the interview and hiring process. A dedicated youth engagement manager, Cristal Ramirez, supports the Advisory Council members and fields requests for their involvement. Ramirez gathers information about each request, including how the members will be compensated or otherwise benefit from the project (for example, by being listed as authors on a final report), and then bringing that information to the members to decide for themselves. NACC also created a [tip sheet for engaging lived experience experts](#) in the child welfare system. Ramirez and the tip sheet were featured in an October 2021 webinar offered through the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges: [Making Lived Experience Engagement Authentic, Intentional, and Mutually Beneficial](#).

Florida Youth SHINE is an entirely youth-led, peer-driven organization that empowers current and former youth in foster care to become leaders and advocates within their communities. Youth SHINE has 14 chapters across Florida, each with a partner organization that provides space, funding, mentors, and support. Local chapters are given autonomy, electing their own leaders and deciding which members will represent them at quarterly statewide gatherings and on the statewide leadership board. The only requirement for participation in Youth SHINE is to be between age 13 and 24 and have some previous experience in the child welfare system. Chapters meet at least once per month to focus on local advocacy efforts, including discussing issues, solutions, and actions they will take to improve the system. Youth SHINE also hosts local and statewide opportunities for peer connections, including games, movies, and other social activities. The youth set their

own agenda for legislative, policy, and media advocacy, and community education activities. They are encouraged to engage in any advocacy that appeals to them, which might include legislative and policy work, media advocacy, work with community agencies, or sharing their artwork with audiences. “Any outlet that youth are interested in for advocacy, we’ll find a way to make it happen,” says Maria Batista, a former member of Youth SHINE and currently one of two peer specialists with the organization. “We just want to be sure their voices are heard.”

The **Indiana Youth Advisory Board** is a program of the nonprofit Foster Success, under contract with the Indiana Department of Child Services. When Megan Tribble first started in her position with Foster Success as director of youth engagement, she proposed a new organizational strategy that was rejected by the youth on the leadership team. So instead she worked in tandem with the youth leaders to create a structure that addressed their desire for a cohesive but non-hierarchical structure, where all leaders could be equal players. They created six positions, one for each of six foundational pillars of Indiana’s older youth initiatives: youth-adult partnerships; youth voice; social networking; building social capital; normalcy and healthy risk-taking; and brokering resources. The leaders in those positions have specific duties related to that principle: for example, the Youth Voice representative is responsible for listening to youth in all regions and advocating for policy changes that reflect their perspectives. All of the positions are paid an equal monthly stipend. Rimy Morris, a

View youth as an asset, not a liability. Make sure they feel like a valued member of the team.

— ALIYAH ZEIEN,
RSW, FOSTER CARE ALUMNUS, STATE YOUTH AMBASSADOR, LOUISIANA

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We want to be offering opportunities, different types of roles and jobs, but we also want to be sure youth have the choice to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ based on complete information.

— CRISTAL RAMIREZ,
YOUTH ENGAGEMENT MANAGER, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNSEL FOR CHILDREN

former Youth Advisory Board member now on staff as a youth advisor for Foster Success, said that the absence of a hierarchy was very important to board members, as they had experienced a competitive culture both in their time in foster care and in earlier iterations of

the advisory board. Morris says that as a result of the current youth-developed structure, the culture of the group has greatly improved: “We now have shared power, we stand up for each other’s values, and we move with integrity.”

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

- 1 Content of this brief was developed with members of the Knowledge Management Lived Experience Advisory Team during four meetings in 2021: May 6, June 1, June 25, and Oct. 22. This team includes youth, parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents with lived experience in the child welfare system, and who serve as strategic partners with Family Voices United, a collaboration between FosterClub, Generations United, the Children’s Trust Fund Alliance, and Casey Family Programs. Team members who contributed to this brief include Aleks Talks, Aliyah Zeien, Ryan Young, Remy Morris, Jessica Cardenas, and Amanda Cruce.
- 2 This brief was informed by interviews with Remy Morris, Indiana Youth Advisory Board, and Megan Tribble, Foster Success, on Oct. 8, 2021; Geori Berman, Florida Youth SHINE, on July 19, 2021; Maria Batista, Florida Youth SHINE, on Aug. 2, 2021; Allison Green, Kim Dvorchak, and Cristal Ramirez, National Association of Counsel for Children, on Aug. 2, 2021; and Samuel Martin, SDM Consulting, on May 10, 2021.

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