



# Foster Care Youth United TIPS

*For Independent Living Coordinators, Social Workers,  
Teachers, Caseworkers, Group Home Staff, and Supervisors*

January/February 2001

**Writing contest:** See p. 13. We offer \$175 in prizes. This month's topic: "What Song or Movie Best Reflects Your Life, and Why?" Ask the young people to be specific and to explain their reasons. The deadline is March 12.

**Letters to the Editor:** See p. 22. FCYU welcomes letters to the editor. They can be quite brief. Encourage youth to send them in—they can grow out of some the lessons below.

**Poetry:** See pps. 16-17. Encourage young people to send in their poems.

**A note on the lessons:** The following lessons are designed to promote reflection on the issues raised by the stories in FCYU. These lessons can be used with foster youth in independent living meetings, counseling sessions, or in other group activities, as well as in individual work with your clients. Each story is summarized briefly, followed by prompts that can be used to initiate discussion and/or brief writing assignments. In addition, group activities and roleplays are suggested for more active learning.

**A note on role plays:** You will need two or three teens to act out the suggested role plays. Make sure the young people understand their roles by briefly reviewing the characters in the stories. Each role play participant has to try to convince the other of her point of view. Let the role play go on for about five minutes. Then have the group discuss what they've seen and relate it back to the story.

## Awards for Youth in Foster Care

See p. 38. For the third consecutive year, FCYU co-sponsors Awards for Youth in Foster Care, which offers five grand prizes of \$1,000 each to foster youth 14-21, as well as 5 special first prizes of \$500 each and 20 first prizes of \$150 each. Youth must be nominated by an adult, complete an application form, and write two brief essays. For an application form and instructions, contact Kendra at 212-279-0708, ext. 114.

## PROBLEMS IN FAMILY COURT, pps 2-15.

**Intro:** Foster youth have their futures decided in family court, but overworked lawyers, long delays, and chaotic waiting rooms can make the experience a nightmare. In the following stories, teens discuss their family court travails and possible ways to improve it.

### Endless Delays Tear Families Apart

In "Disorder in the Court," p. 2, the anonymous writer describes her frustration with having her family court case adjourned four times. One court date is canceled because a lawyer doesn't have her case records; another is scheduled on a day when she has five finals. The numerous delays finally cause the writer to drop charges of sexual abuse against her stepfather. In "Why We Wait," p. 3, the same writer interviews lawyers to find out the reason for the long delays: everyone involved—lawyers, judges, and social workers—is overworked and overbooked.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—How do you feel about the writer's experiences in family court? Have you had similar experiences there?

—What is your reaction to the writer's decision to drop charges against her stepfather because of the delays in family court? If you were her, would you have made that decision? Why/why not?

—The writer says her family court experience helped to tear her family apart. In your experience, are there other ways in which the foster care system keeps families apart? What changes would you make in the system to help bring families together?

**Activity:** Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Have the young people list three changes they would make in how family court is run. Go around the room, read out loud, discuss.



### Silenced in Court

Ijeoma Okolo, in "Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil," p. 6, goes to family court numerous times for a hearing on her sexual abuse case, but each time she is not allowed to speak in court. Not being able to tell her side of the story—and finding out years later what her family said about her to the judge—leave her feeling angry and betrayed.

In a second article, "Open the Doors and Let Us Speak," p. 8, she interviews lawyers to find out the reasons why youth are not allowed in the courtroom: 1) the child will be disturbed by what she hears, 2) lawyers are better able to represent the child, and 3) parents may not want their children to know things that may come out about them in court.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Do you agree with Ijeoma that youth should be allowed to speak in family court? Why/why not?

—Ijeoma says she was hurt more by not knowing what was said in the courtroom than by anything she might have heard there. What is your reaction to this? Are there times when you wish you knew the truth rather than having it hidden from

### Join Our Staff!

**Write for FCYU:** We need writers for our program, which meets after school in Manhattan. Writers of every ability receive careful, professional attention from adult editors. School credit can be arranged. For information, call Kendra at 212-279-0708, ext. 114, or Rachel at ext. 113.

you? Are there times when it is better not to know the truth?

—Ijeoma found out the truth years later by reading her records. Are you interested in seeing your records some day? Why/why not?

Activity: Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Youth are not currently allowed in the courtroom because the adults in charge say: 1) the child will be disturbed by what she hears, 2) lawyers are better able to represent the child, and 3) children should not know certain things about their parents that may come out in court. Have the young people come up with responses to these three points. Go around the room, list on board, discuss. What are the pros and cons of having a child appear in family court? Is there a middle ground between having children appear all the time and keeping them out of court altogether?

Roleplay: A foster youth and a lawyer. The lawyer thinks the youth shouldn't be in court, because she will be disturbed by what she hears. The foster youth wants to be in court so she can know the truth and tell her side of the story.



### Seeing It From the Lawyers' Side

In "A Day in the Life of Your Lawyer," p. 9, and "Teens Talk About Their Lawyers," pps. 10-11, we hear from lawyers about the pressures they face in their often overwhelming jobs, and from foster youth about good and bad experi-

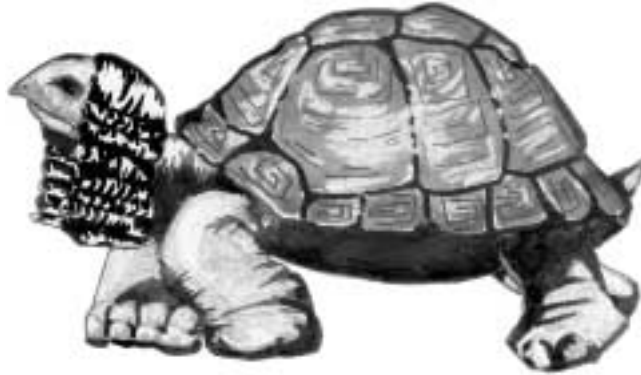
ences with their lawyers.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—The writers talk about good and bad experiences with their lawyers. What has been your experience with your lawyers? Describe one good experience and one bad experience.

—One of the lawyers says she can't be an "everyday" person in her clients' lives. What is your reaction to this?

Activity: Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Have the young people make a list of how they would like to be treated by their lawyers. Go around the room, list on board, discuss.



### Is This Any Way to Run a Court?

Finally, in "Doing Time in the Waiting Room," p. 14, Alene Taylor describes the chaos of the waiting room at family court. Parents and children argue and sometimes fight, the waits are endless, and there are no activities to occupy the kids. An accompanying article on p. 15 describes how family court in California is client-friendly, housed in a beautiful space with lots of activities for the kids. And, unlike in New York, the youth get to speak directly to the judge in the privacy of her chambers.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Did you have a similar experience in the family court waiting room to the one Alene describes? If so, what impact did it have on you?

—Alene thinks there should be activities in the waiting room to keep the children occupied. List three other changes you would make in the way the waiting room is run.

### YOUNG MOTHERS IN THE SYSTEM, pps. 18-21.

**Intro:** Too often, young people who have babies in the system are shunted from placement to placement because

there are not enough homes for them and many foster parents won't take in teens with children. In the following articles, teens describe that experience, as well as the difficulties in giving birth and being a parent at too young an age.

### Trying to Find a Home for Baby and Me

In "Baby on the Move," p. 18, and "No Moms Allowed," p. 19, Lillian Cremedy writes about how she had a problem finding a good foster home as a teen mother in care. She moves twice while pregnant and twice after her baby is born, before finally settling down in a supervised apartment program. She interviews a foster care supervisor on why foster parents are reluctant to take in kids with babies.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—If you work with young mothers, have them discuss their reactions to Lillian's experience of trying to find a good placement for herself and her baby. Did they have a similar

experience? What impact did it have on them?

—Then have the group come up with a list of changes they would make in the system to provide a better experience for young mothers. For example, Lillian recommends paying foster parents more money to take in mothers and babies. What other suggestions can they come up with?

Activity: Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. On p. 20, Lillian describes why foster parents don't want to take in teens with babies: the foster parents worry that the teen will be more difficult to control, will set a bad example for the other children, or will leave them stuck caring for the baby. Have the young people respond to these concerns. What would they say to a foster parent who thinks that way? Are some of these worries justified? Why/why not? Discuss.

### Advice from a Teen Mom

In "Too Much Too Soon," p. 20, Gina Mikels, who gave birth to a son the day after she turned 15, looks back on her experience with regret. While she loves her son, she also knows she was too young to have a child. She lost all the freedom of childhood, while taking on all the responsibilities of an adult (and none of the privileges).

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Gina looks back on her experience of having a child with regret. Have you had an experience you now regret that you would give teens advice on? What is it? What advice would you give?

—What parts of Gina's story do you agree with? What do you disagree with?

—What does Gina mean when she says that being a mother gives her all the responsibilities of an adult, but not the privileges? Can you give an example of this from your own life? Can this be true for a teenager who doesn't have a child? How?

—Write a short letter to Gina, telling her what you think of her story.

Roleplay: Gina and a friend. Gina's friend is having unprotected sex and doesn't care if she becomes pregnant, because she thinks she can handle having a child. Gina wants her friend to know that she's making a big mistake if she thinks having a child is easy, and that she should change her behavior.

### The Pain of Pregnancy

In "Oh, Baby!," p. 21, Lillian Cremedy writes about her complication-filled pregnancy and painful childbirth. Her teen body wasn't ready to carry a child, and it didn't help that she was locked out from her foster home during her pregnancy.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Have the group read the story. Ask them if it has changed their views of pregnancy and birth. If so, how? If not, why not?

### GOING HOME TO FAMILY, pps. 24-30.

Intro: Foster youth who go home to their biological families often face a rough transition, especially if the original family problems have not been adequately dealt with. The following stories show the complications involved.

### Can Mom Get Her Act Together?

In "Wildin' Out," p. 24, Jackie Knight starts acting out a lot of anger at 12 from being abandoned by her father, having a drug-addicted mother, and living with a strict grandmother. She gets so wild that she ends up in foster care. She writes a letter expressing her anger, and after a social worker urges Jackie to show it to her mother, it opens up communication between them. Jackie is now scheduled to go home, which both excites and worries her.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Jackie writes that beneath "all of that acting crazy was a lot of hurt," the hurt of not having parents. Are there ways in which your behavior was influenced by the hurt you were feeling? What enabled you to get in touch with that hurt and/or stop the behavior?

—A relative tells Jackie that her mother will never get her life together and that she should just move on with her life. What is your reaction to that advice? When is it time to move on and how do you know that?

—Jackie starts to change when she



expresses her true feelings to her mother in a letter. Was there a time when expressing your true feelings helped you deal with a problem in a better way? How did you express your feelings and what happened?

—Jackie says that learning about her mother's difficult past didn't make her anger go away, but did help her to understand herself a little better. Have you had a similar experience with family or friends, where knowing about someone's past made you closer to them and have a better understanding of yourself?

—Pretend you're Jackie. Write a short letter to your mother, expressing your hopes and fears about returning home to live with her.

### You Can't Go Home Again

In "Going Home Again," p. 28, T.J. writes about leaving foster care to return to a dysfunctional home environment that had never really changed. The writer's mother and grandmother are alcoholics, and are in denial about past and present problems. Now 26, T.J. still lives at home, as it's not easy to separate from the only family she's ever known.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—T.J. begins to change while in foster care—she goes to counseling, stops drinking, and finds better ways to cope with her emotions. But when she goes home, she finds her family hasn't changed and gets caught up in their problems all over again. What should the foster care system do differently to prevent situations like this from happening? What should be done before a child returns home from care?

—Although her family doesn't treat her well, T.J. finds it very difficult to separate from them. Why is it so hard for her to make that break? Have you had a similar experience?

—Write a short letter to T.J., telling her what you think she should do to have a better family situation. Read and discuss. (Some youth may think her only choice is to move out; others might have different suggestions.)

Roleplay: T.J. and a friend. T.J.'s friend knows about her family situation and can't understand why T.J. just doesn't leave. T.J. wants her friend to know why separating from family isn't as easy as it seems.

### HELPING PARENTS GET THEIR KIDS BACK, pps. 31-33.

Lynne Miller, in "Fighting for Families," p. 31, lost her four-year-old son to foster care because of her drug abuse, but eventually got him back after going through counseling and treatment. She now works as a parent advocate at a foster care agency, helping parents to get their kids back and to deal with their anger and resentment once they are reunited. Because Lynne has been through the same situation, the parents are more willing to open up to her.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Lynne says more than half of the parents she works with are in denial, placing blame everywhere except on themselves. She also says that they can't accept someone else's judgment that they abused or neglected their children. What is your reaction to this? If in your experience, is this true? What should workers

like Lynne do to help parents face the truth about what happened?

—Lynne describes how children are hurt and angry when they return to their parents from foster care. Sometimes they feel it's their fault they were in foster care. Have you ever felt this way? What might help you or what has helped you to deal with these feelings?

Roleplay: A parent and a child who has just come home from foster care. The parent is happy to have the child home and wants them both to move on and forget the past. The child wants the parent to know that they have to talk about what happened in the past before they can move on.



**THE SECRET OF SEXUAL ABUSE,**  
pps. 34-36.

In "A Partner in His Crime?" (Part II) by Anonymous, p. 16, the writer is sexually abused by a family friend named Johnny. Afraid of being blamed or disbelieved, she keeps the abuse secret and even thinks she caused it to happen. In this conclusion, the writer suffers from pain and depression until she finally tells a school guidance counselor. Still, the family blames the writer, who goes into foster care, gradually accepts what happened to her, and realizes it was not her fault.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—When the writer's mother finds out about the sexual abuse, she blames the writer for what happened. This is common in sexual abuse cases. Why do you think this happens so often?

—Lots of times young people will blame themselves for bad things that have happened to them. The writer's mental

health begins to improve when she no longer sees the abuse as her fault. What is your reaction to that? Was there a time you blamed yourself for something that wasn't your fault? What made you change your view?

—Sexual abuse is difficult to talk about, but a lot of kids in care have experienced it. What could the system do to help kids deal with that experience?

—Write a short letter to the writer, telling her what you think of her story.

Roleplay: The writer and her mother. The writer's mother thinks the writer liked what Johnny was doing and that it was her fault it happened. The writer wants her mother to know how hurt she feels for being blamed for what happened.

**A DYSFUNCTIONAL DAY IN THE PARK,**  
p. 37.

Karol Kwiatkowska, in "Smack Down Picnic," describes an agency picnic that turns into a free-for-all. Petty rivalries escalate into fisticuffs between residents, and the mayhem further intensifies when a staff member goes haywire. The agency cancels further activities involving all group homes.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Karol says the girls in her agency have problems with each other, usually based on "stupid little differences." Is the situation similar in your agency? If so, what could be done to help residents get along better?

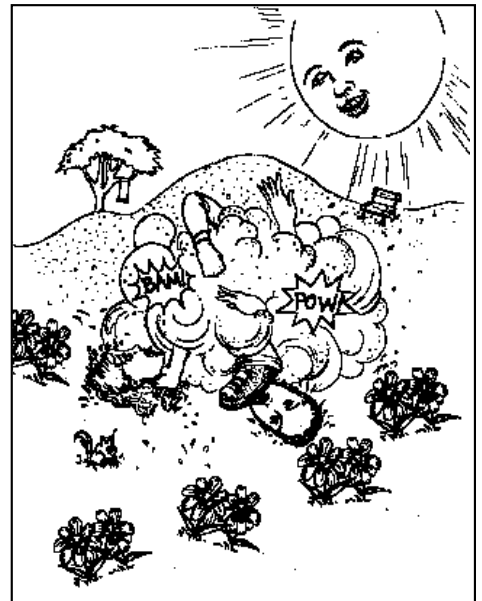
—Why do you think Ms. "G" lost it on the bus?

—By canceling all future group activities, the agency seems to be punishing everyone for the actions of a few. Do you

think that was the right approach? Why/why not? Have you been in a similar situation with your own agency?

—What could the agency or residents do to prevent these kinds of outbreaks at group activities?

Activity: Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. They should pretend they are in charge of the agency Karol writes about. The youth must come up with three new rules to prevent these incidents from happening again in the future (but without banning future activities involving all group homes, as the agency did in the story). Read aloud and discuss.



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Youth Communication also publishes a series of books on independent living topics, including *Breaking Away* (a guide to leaving the system) and *The Struggle to Be Strong* (an anthology and guide to helping teens develop their strengths and resilience). For more information, write, call, or check our Website, [Youthcomm.org](http://Youthcomm.org)