



# Tips for Staff

## How to Use *Foster Care Youth United*:

-  To Train Teens (IL Programs)
-  To Train Adult Staff

### In This Issue:

## FOSTER HOMES: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE IN-BETWEEN

### Introduction

In the following articles, FCYU writers look at their experiences in foster homes. Some youth have suffered mistreatment in a system that is supposed to protect them from abuse. Others have been more fortunate. The writers look at why teens in particular often have bad experiences in homes, and offer suggestions on what might be done to improve the quality of foster homes and foster parents.

### Worse Than Home

In "Just Another \*%#@! Foster Home," p. 6, Arelis Rosario describes how she was mistreated in her first two foster homes. In the first, she was locked in a room, force-fed, and physically abused. In her second, the foster mother asked her to lie to social workers about overcrowded conditions and never bought her new clothes. Eventually she moves into a third home where she is treated with kindness and respect.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

- Arelis's foster mother asks her to lie about overcrowded conditions in the foster home. Would you have lied or told the truth? Why?
- Why was it hard for Arelis to speak up about the problems in her foster home?
- How is Arelis treated better in her third foster home?
- Arelis says the agencies should close all the bad foster homes. Why do you think the agencies have not done that?

### Group activity

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Arelis says that the system should figure out "creative ways of finding decent foster homes." Tell the groups that they are in charge of coming up with new ways for finding good foster homes for teens. Go around the room, list the suggestions on the board, and discuss.

### Harder to Place Teens

Arelis Rosario and Julie Stewart, in "Tougher For Teens" (p. 8), interview an independent living coordinator about why it's so hard to place foster teens in good homes. One of the main problems is that many foster parents have negative views of teenagers.



## FIVE EASY STEPS

### How to Use These Lessons to Run Workshop for Teens and Adults

- 1) Before the workshop, read the story to yourself and review the discussion questions and the activities to make sure they are suitable for your group. You may want to add or delete questions, change the activity based on your experience with the group, etc.
- 2) Introduce the story (briefly). Note that it's a true story by a teen in foster care. Mention the topic. You can ask if anyone has had experience with this topic.
- 3) Read the story aloud. The facilitator can do the reading, but if possible go around the room and have each person read a paragraph or two. That increases involvement and, for teens, helps reinforce their reading skills.
- 4) Ask the discussion questions. Remember: some questions are factual, and you want to get the facts of the story straight. However, many questions end with "why or why not?" These are open-ended questions. Try to be as nonjudgmental as possible with these questions. Encourage a range of opinions. If someone says something ridiculous, more often than not someone else in the group will challenge them. You don't need to.
- 5) Conduct the activity. (Note: If the activity is a role play, have the participants respond to the role play when it's over. They should be critical viewers, not passive listeners.)

When you're done take a minute to review the discussion, highlighting the most positive and thoughtful comments that were made.

Remember, you can use these stories in IL classes with teens to help them explore constructive solutions to the problems they face, or you can use them to help group home staff, social workers, law guardians, or foster parents to better understand the teens they work with.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Many foster parents have negative images of teens. What kinds of negative images do they have, and where do you think they come from? What could be done to change those negative images?

—Foster parents might be willing to take in teens if they got more support from the agency. What kinds of support do you think foster parents need to take teens into their homes?

—If you were a foster parent, how would you run your home to make the teen feel welcome and understood?

—Arelis describes a “honeymoon” period in the foster home, where everyone gets along. Why do you think the “honeymoon” ends and conflicts begin?

—Arelis describes the need for “flexibility” in the foster home. How do the foster parents need to show flexibility with teens? How do the teens need to show flexibility?

### Roleplay

Two teens, playing a foster parent and a social worker. The foster parent does not want to take in teens, because she has a bad impression of them. The social worker wants the foster parent to reconsider, and explains what teens need.

### Group activity

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Tell the groups that they are in charge of coming up with a TV or advertising campaign to recruit foster homes for teens. They should describe, in detail, the commercials and ads they would run, the spokesperson for their campaign, etc. Go around the room, list the suggestions on the board, and discuss.

## A Lesbian Foster Parent

Arelis Rosario, in “She’s Gay—And the Best Foster Mom I Know,” p. 10, writes about her sister’s foster mother, Mary. She’s the best foster mom Arelis has ever known, and she just happens to be gay.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Why does Arelis like Mary? How does she say Mary is different from other foster parents she’s had?

—How does Mary solve problems in her foster home? How does that compare with the way your foster parents solve problems in your

home?

—How does Mary make the holidays special for her foster children?

—Writing: Do you want to be a foster parent someday? If so, why? If not, why not?

### Roleplay

Arelis and a social worker from her agency. The social worker doesn’t like Mary as



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a foster parent because she’s a lesbian. Arelis wants the social worker to know why Mary is a good foster parent.

## Where’s the Loot?

In “Show Me The Money,” p. 12, Arelis Rosario argues that there would be less tension between foster parents and foster youth if the young people knew how much money the foster parents were getting and how it was being

spent.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Do you want to know how much money your foster parents receive? Why or why not?

—Should a certain amount of the money foster parents receive go directly to the foster youth? Why or why not?

—Why do you think agencies don’t give some of the money directly to foster youth? Are there good reasons for why they don’t?

### Group activity

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Tell the groups they are in charge of coming up with a new payment policy for foster parents. Of the \$626 the foster parents receive for each child, each month, the groups are to decide how much goes directly to the child. They have to come up with rules to make sure the child is spending the money wisely. They also have to come up with a policy to make sure the foster parents are spending the rest of the money for the right things in the home—food, rent, furniture, etc. Go around the room, list the suggestions on the board, and discuss.

## Speaking Up About Abuse

In “Living a Lie,” p. 14, the anonymous writer describes the nightmare of being sexually abused by her foster father for several years. Afraid to speak up for fear of not being believed or disrupting the family, she finally breaks her silence when she’s 12.

## Three Ways Your Teens Can Get Published

**1) Writing contest:** See p. 19. We offer \$175 in prizes. This month’s topic:

### Do You Think Foster Care Should Remove a Child From a Home Where There’s Violence Between the Parents? Why or Why Not?

Ask the young people to be specific and to explain their reasons. You may want to discuss the topic with your group before they begin writing. The deadline for submissions is **March 1**.

**2) Letters to the Editor:** FCYU welcomes letters to the editor. Encourage youth to write to us about their reactions to the stories—the letters can be quite brief. Some of the lessons below can result in short letters to the magazine.

**3) Poetry:** See pps. 30-31. Encourage young people to send in their poems.

### A note on the lessons

The following lessons are designed to promote reflection on 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 roleplays

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

### A note on the group activities

These activities are designed to have students work together in pairs or small groups. They can then share their work with the larger group.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—What reasons does the writer give for keeping silent about the abuse she suffered? Do you think these were good reasons? Why or why not?

—Three things help the writer decide to speak up. What are they?

—How does the abuse affect the writer's feelings about herself and other people?

—Are there things that agencies can do to make it easier for foster youth to speak up about this kind of abuse? What are they?

### Roleplay

The writer and a friend. The friend is being abused in her foster home but is afraid to speak up. The writer describes what she did to handle her situation and why she decided to finally speak up.

## FOSTER YOUTH AND COLLEGE

### Introduction

In the following stories, foster youth write about the challenges of getting into and paying

for college. They look at the difficulty of choosing the right school, financial aid opportunities, the struggle to balance work and school, and how they're succeeding in higher education despite the odds.

## Having a Plan

In "And Still I Rise," p. 20, Luis Reyes describes how he has overcome the temptations of the streets to apply himself academically. He's close to graduating from high school and is making preparations for college. He looks at why many foster youth lack direction and can't focus on school.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Luis almost lost himself to the streets, before a violent encounter made him go back to school. Has anything changed your attitude about school at some point in your life? What was it? How did your attitude change?



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—Do you feel education is important to your future? Why or why not?

—Luis finds out he has a talent for writing and wants to develop this talent in college. Do you have a special talent you want to develop in school? What is it?

—Why do so many foster youth have a hard time focusing on school in general and on college in particular?

—One foster youth tells Luis, "I don't have a plan. I'm waiting for a plan to come to me." Do you have a plan for college or for life after foster care? If so, what is it? If not, what keeps you from coming up with a plan?

### Group activity

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Tell the groups they are in charge of educational services in their agency. They are to come up with new ideas and rules to help

foster youth plan for their education after leaving foster care. For example, they could recommend that adult mentors work individually with foster youth in planning their education. Go around the room, list the suggestions on the board, and discuss.

## Balancing School and Work

In "Stressed For Success", p. 22, Rana Sino interviews former foster youth Chris Bogle on the difficulties of balancing college and work.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Chris was inspired by the TV show Law and Order to become a lawyer. What inspired you to pursue your career goal?

—If you don't currently have a career goal, how do you plan on eventually finding one?

—During his first semester in college, Chris gets distracted from his studies and hangs out too much. Are you worried about keeping focused on your studies? Why or why not?

—Do you plan to work during college? If so, what kind of job will you hold and how many hours will you work?

## Choosing a College

In "Saved by the Bell," p. 24, Merli Desrosier writes about choosing the right college—one that's affordable and where she'll fit in.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—If you are planning on college, how are you going to choose the right school for yourself? What are you looking for in a school? How do you plan on finding the information you need?

—When Merli visits a college, she feels out of place among the other students, who have more family support and money. Do you worry about feeling out of place in college? Why or why not? If so, what could you do to overcome those fears?

—What are your biggest worries about attending college? How do you plan on addressing those fears?

### Group activity

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. The groups should discuss their worries about getting into college and about succeeding there once they get in. Go around the room, list the concerns on the board, and discuss ways they can make the right college choices.

## A Second Chance

Matthew Dedewo, in "Freshman Blues," p. 26, describes how he became overwhelmed academically and financially during his first try at college and decided to drop out. With a better sense of what it takes to succeed, he's now back in school.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

- Name three mistakes that Matthew made during his first try at college.
- Do you have a sense of what your college major might be? How did you decide on that field?
- How could foster care agencies provide better assistance to people like Matthew?

### Group activity

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Based on Matthew's article, the groups are to come up with three problems they might encounter in college, along with possible solutions to each of the problems. Go around the room, list the contributions on the board, and discuss.

## Paying for College

In "The College of My Dreams—With No Money Down," p. 28, Lishone Bowsky describes how she's financing her college education by researching little-known scholarships available to foster youth.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

- Have you thought about how you will pay for college? If so, what is your plan?
- After reading Lishone's article, do you have a different view of applying to and paying for college? Why or why not?
- Can foster care be an advantage in applying to college? How?

### Group activity

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. The groups should come up with as many questions as they can about paying for college. Go around the room, list the questions on the board, and discuss ways in which they can answer the questions and find out more about financial aid.

## OTHER STORIES

### Dealing With Anger

Julie Stewart in "The Fury Deep Inside," p. 2, writes about how she suffered abuse in foster homes and, as a result, became a very

angry person who couldn't control her emotions. Eventually she finds that opening up about her feelings helps her to deal with them in more constructive ways.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

- Why is Julie so angry?
- How is Julie repeating what was done to her?
- Name three things that help Julie get better control of her emotions.
- Julie says there was a good side to her anger. What was it?
- Why is part of Julie scared to give up her anger?
- What would you like to change about the way you express your emotions? How could you go about making that change?

### Roleplay

Two teens, playing Julie and a friend. The friend feels she could never stop being angry. Julie describes how she's been able to be less angry.



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## The Truth About the Past

In "The Mystery of My Past," p. 32, Joann-Marie Colon-Santiago writes about her longing to know the truth of why she was removed from her family. She doesn't have many memories about her home, and isn't sure how to go about finding out what really happened.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

- Do you know why you went into foster care? If so, are you glad you know? Why? If not, do you want to find out? Why or why not?
- In general, is it better for kids to know why they're in the system? Why or why not?
- Some people feel that kids "need to be protected from the truth." Do you agree? Why or why not? Are there some cases where it's

better not to know the truth? What are they?

### Roleplay

Two teens, both adopted from foster care. One teen feels it's important for her to find out why she's in care. The other teen feels it's better not to know.

## No Secrets?

In "The Right to Know" by Joann-Marie Colon-Santiago, p. 36, the author interviews a child protective worker and a lawyer about foster youths' rights in finding out why they're in care, and the pros and cons of knowing that information.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

- Would you like to be able to read your files someday? Why or why not?
- What is more important: the child's right to know, or the family's privacy?
- Would you like to find your biological family someday? Why or why not? If so, how do you plan on doing it? If not, why not?

### Group activity:

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Tell the groups they are in charge of coming up with a new policy at their agency for disclosing information to foster youth. They have to decide under what circumstances and at what age a youth can see her files. They also have to decide when it's better for a file to be kept secret from a young person. Go around the room, list the suggestions on the board, and discuss.

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Tips for Staff is written for the bulk subscribers to *New Youth Connections* to help them use the magazine more effectively with teens in their classes and programs.

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