



# Tips for Staff

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

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

## Escaping from Problems

### Introduction

In the following articles, several *FCYU* writers look at how they escape the stress and problems of living in foster care. Some do so in healthy ways—by talking to friends, focusing on school, reading, writing—while others use escapes that help for a while, but hurt in the long run, liking abusing drugs or alcohol, or going AWOL. Use these articles and the accompanying exercises to encourage discussion about which escapes are positive, and why.

### On the Run

In “Running Scared,” p. 2, Marissa Hoey leaves foster care to live with her biological mother. When things don’t work out, and she’s brought back to her old group home, she decides to run away instead. But Marissa eventually realizes she is running from her problems, and returns to foster care to face them.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—When Marissa realizes that she can’t live with her biological mother and has to return to foster care, she writes, “All I was certain about was that I was going to run.” Did you ever reach that point in your life, where you knew you had to run? What did you do? What eventually happened? Looking back now, would you do the same thing? Why or why not?

—Marissa writes, “I wanted help, but I felt like nobody could ever understand me enough to help me.” Have you ever felt that way? Did you find someone who could understand you? What was it about that person that made you feel understood? If you haven’t found someone who understands you, how does that affect your day-to-day life?

## Awards for Youth in Foster Care \$11,250 in prizes!

For the fifth consecutive year, *FCYU* co-sponsors the Child Welfare Fund Awards for Youth in Foster Care, which offers five Grand Prizes of \$1,000 each to foster youth 14-21, as well as 25 First Prizes of \$250 each. Youth must be nominated by an adult, complete an application form, and write two brief essays. For an application form and instructions, contact Nora McCarthy or Kendra Hurley at 212-279-0708, ext. 113 or ext. 114, or request an application by email at [FCYUmail@youthcomm.org](mailto:FCYUmail@youthcomm.org). See p. 27 of *FCYU* for details.



## 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 generally don’t need to, except to maintain a safe and respectful atmosphere in the room.

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.



—Marissa says she was always telling people not to run from their problems, “and here I was, running from everything and everybody, going nowhere for no reason.” Have you ever done something yourself, that you advised others not to do? Why did you advise others not to do it? Why did you end up doing it yourself? Were you able to eventually take your own advice? Why or why not?

—Marissa begins to understand why she ran: “I think I was scared and not ready to admit that things were not working out at my mother’s house.” Have you ever come to a similar realization about why you ran away from a problem? What were you afraid to admit, and why?

## Pain as an Escape

Christine McKenna, in “Cut Down” (p. 5), looks at how she began to cut herself to relieve intolerable feelings of emotional pain due to an abusive childhood. With the help of therapy and a caring adult, she begins to understand the feelings behind the impulse, and she finds more positive ways to deal with her emotions. In a sidebar (“Who Cuts and Why,” p. 9), Christine interviews a therapist about cutting.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—As a child, Christine felt that everything she did or felt was tied into other people’s moods. She wasn’t allowed to express her true feelings. What impact did this have on her? Were you, as a child, able to express your true feelings? If not, how did that affect you?

—What positive things does Christine get from cutting herself? How is cutting also a negative thing for her?

—For a long time, cutting gives Christine a sense of control. But then she begins to feel that the habit is out of control. What’s the differ-

ence between a habit giving you a sense of control, and feeling out of control? Did you ever have an experience similar to Christine’s, where a habit went from giving you a sense of control, to feeling out of control?

—To survive the abuse of her childhood, Christine learned to mentally separate from her body. How did that affect her, as she grew older?

—When Chris, the staff member, says to Christine, “You must be in so much pain inside to do this to yourself,” she is stunned, because no one had ever said something like that to her. Why does that statement affect Christine so much? Has anyone ever had a big impact on you, by saying something like that? What did the person say, and why did it have such a big impact?

—Instead of blaming herself for cutting, Christine tries to understand the feelings behind why she does it. What has she learned about her feelings? How does understanding her feelings give her better control over them? How does she try to express her feelings in a healthier way?



—Why does the idea of completely giving up cutting frighten Christine?

—Writing: Christine cuts herself because it is one of the few ways she feels comfortable expressing and escaping the pain she holds inside. In what ways do you feel comfortable expressing your pain? Do you think you express your pain in a healthy way? Why or why not?

## The Ecstasy And the Agony

The anonymous author of “Hooked,” p. 10, describes how she and her boyfriend Leon first get addicted to smoking marijuana, then become heavy users of the hallucinogen ecstasy. Using drugs wipes out the writer’s bank account, and she struggles to give up the habit.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Have you ever had a similar experience with drugs or alcohol? In what ways?

—After she comes down from her high, how does the writer feel?

—The writer reaches a low point after she wipes out her savings account and gets punched in the eye. Did you ever reach a similar low point, in abusing drugs or alcohol? What happened, and how did it affect your attitude toward drugs?

—The writer has gone just two weeks without smoking a blunt. Do you think she will stay off drugs? Why or why not?

—What is your reaction to the writer saying she loved Leon and was planning to marry him?

## The Joy of a Mentor

In “Out and About with My

## Three Ways Your Teens Can Get Published

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

**“What do you expect from your law guardian and what have your experiences been like?”**

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 Feb. 28<sup>th</sup>.

**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. 16-17. 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 some cases, where we think a question is particularly suited for writing, we indicate that. 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.



Stephanie Wilson

Mentor," p. 14, Cynthia Orbes explains how an adult named Gia befriends her and becomes her mentor. After Cynthia's mother dies and she goes into foster care, Gia becomes an important parent-figure in the young girl's life.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Is there an adult in your life who plays a role similar to Gia's? Who is that person, and

how did you become close? If you don't have such a person in your life, are there ways you could make that kind of connection with an adult?

—Gia helps Cynthia forget how sad she is over her mother's death. Cynthia writes, "It was good for a while not to have to face the truth, which was that I didn't have parents to care about me." When is it necessary, or a positive thing, to not face the truth? When is it better to face the truth, no matter how difficult, rather than avoid it?

—Gia can't replace Cynthia's mother, but she is a kind of "parent-figure." What's the difference between a real parent and a "parent-figure"?

—Gia helps Cynthia give up bad habits, like whining, and teaches her good habits, like reading books. How has an adult helped you give up bad habits and learn good ones?

## Foster Youth, Relationships, and Trust

### Introduction

Growing up in foster care often makes it difficult for young people to trust, and in the following essays they explore how this affects their romantic relationships.

Have your group read one or both of the following stories. Then conduct the group activity described below.

### Two Players Settle Down

In "Opening Up to My Shorty", p. 30, Antwaun Garcia explains how he cheated on his girlfriends and basically used women as "toys." But then he meets a girl he can really open up to about his feelings, and he discovers the satisfaction of commitment.

And in "A Playa Hangs Up His Jersey", p. 31, Kareem Banks explains how he once cheated on girls left and right. Then he meets a girl he really likes and falls into a monogamous relationship. But when he finds out the girl is cheating on him, it brings up difficult issues of trust and honesty.

### Group activity:

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups.

Goal: To help youth reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of a committed relationship. To help them identify and express what values are important to them in a relationship.

Vocabulary: Committed, monogamous. You can write these words on the board, and



Kenly Dillard

ask the group to define them.

Pass around pieces of paper (you can rip 8 ½ x 11 sheets into smaller pieces, if need be).

Tell the groups the topic of the stories—staying committed in a relationship. On one side of the paper, they should write a couple of positive things about staying committed in a relationship. On the other side, a couple of negative or scary things about staying in a relationship. (Positive examples: they'll grow closer to the person, they'll learn to express emotions or reveal secrets, they'll feel secure in having someone there. Negative examples: they'll have to put their trust in the person, they run the risk of getting hurt, they will have to put up with things they don't like about the person.)

Go around the room. First have everyone read the positives. You can gently prod them, challenge them, and let them make comments too. It's fine to get into a bit of a discussion or disagreement about these points. Then have everyone read the negatives. Again, try to stimulate a bit of discussion and even disagreement about their points. You can list the positives and negatives on the board, if you choose.

Ask volunteers to read the story aloud. At various points in the story, you can stop to ask questions of the group. For example, "Why did Antwaun cheat on girls?" or "How does Kareem react when he finds out his girlfriend is cheating on him?"

After you finish reading, ask if anyone wants to add or change anything about their list of positives or negatives. Ask if they have changed their views of monogamous relationships in any way. Ask additional questions about the story or stories. The goal of this part of the discussion is to have the group share feelings about trust, values, and their experiences in relationships.

## Learning to 'Be Herself'

Seandrea Evans, in "In Search of Seandrea," p. 35, writes about how an erratic mother and the whims of foster parents caused her to be unsure of how to act or what to say. Adapting her personality to fit the needs of others has made it hard for her to express her feelings in relationships. In a sidebar on p. 39, Seandrea interviews a therapist on how children develop a sense of self.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—How does Seandrea's relationship with her biological mother and foster mothers affect her personality?

—In what ways is Seandrea "a chameleon, always changing form"? In what ways are you a chameleon?

—Do you know who you are and find it easy to express yourself? Why or why not? Does that ability change, depending on who you're with? How?

—Seandrea wants her foster mother to see her as "the perfect child." Why does Seandrea want that? How does being "the perfect child" affect Seandrea?

—Why does Seandrea act flirtatious with guys? What kinds of problems does she have in relationships?

—The only time Seandrea feels comfortable with herself is when she dances. Is there an activity that gives you a similar feeling? What is it?

—Seandrea has a hard time expressing her feelings in relationships. What do you think she needs to do in order to express her feelings?

## Other Articles

### Did They Need to be Taken Away?

In "A Knock on the Door," p. 20, Philnea Timmons describes how her children were taken away from her after she beat her son with a belt. Philnea educates herself about the system and completes the requirements to get her children back, and they will be released to her soon. Nevertheless, Philnea feels that much more could have been done to keep her children home in the first place.

### Group activity:

Two students will be selected as jurors. Divide the rest of the class into two groups.

Goal: To help youth reflect on when it is proper for a child to be removed from the home. To help them identify the problems and conflicts in helping a troubled family, and to

relate those issues to their own lives.

Pass around pieces of paper (you can rip 8 1/2 x 11 sheets into smaller pieces, if need be).

Tell the group the topic of the story—a mother's account of her children being removed from the home and placed into foster care. Tell the group, "We're going to decide today whether the children should have been removed from the home, or whether the children should have been left in the home and the family helped in other ways."

Have the two jurors sit alongside you. Divide the rest of the class in half. Tell one group that they will argue that the children have to be removed. Tell the other group that they will argue that the children will be left with the



mother, and the family helped in other ways. Each group has to come up with at least three reasons to support their case. They need to listen closely to the story and jot down notes. They can also use their imagination and common sense.

Ask volunteers to read the story aloud. At various points in the story, you can stop to ask questions of the group, where you see fit.

After you're done reading, give the groups ten minutes maximum to come up with their arguments. Encourage the groups to get ideas from every group member. Remind them that they are writing down at least three ideas. Prompt them, if necessary, with one idea for and one idea against removal, listed on the board (for example, "the children could have been harmed more if left in the house" or "family counseling might have kept the family together"). Note: don't give them more than one idea as an example.

You and the two selected young people will be the jury. Take turns questioning each side about their arguments, challenging them, trying to get them to carefully consider the pros and cons of their suggestions. After the arguments, the jurors meet briefly to decide who has made the best case. Before announcing the verdict, the jury should summarize the arguments of each side. Then, announce the verdict, and the reasons behind it. Ask the teams if the group activity has changed their views about the need to place children in foster care, or their own placement in foster care.

## Foster Care on Film

In "Watching *Antwone Fisher*, Seeing Ourselves," p. 28, several *FCYU* writers discuss their reactions to the movie, which depicts how a former foster youth confronts the demons of his past after he joins the navy.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Antwone never forgot his difficult childhood, and had a bad temper because of it. How are you emotions affected today by what happened in your past?

—The movie reminds some foster youth of how hard it is for them to trust people. In what ways do you see yourself in *Antwone*?

—In the book, *Antwone's* mother explains why she wasn't a better mother, and this helps *Antwone* feel less angry. Has someone's explanation of your past made you feel less angry? Has someone's explanation ever made you feel more angry?

—Therapy helps *Antwone* confront his demons. What has helped you to confront yours?

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

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