



# Foster Care Youth United TIPS

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

March/April 2001

## Writing contest:

See p. 13. We offer \$175 in prizes. This month's topic: "If a Teen Becomes Pregnant, and Isn't Ready to be a Good Mother, What Should She Do? Why?" Ask the young people to be specific and to explain their reasons. The deadline is May 15. (Sorry about the tight deadline—we were late getting to press this month.)

## 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.

## Poetry:

See pps. 20-21. Encourage young people to send in their poems.

## Summer Writing Workshops:

### New York and San Francisco

Write for FCYU and earn a stipend: This summer, from July 9 to Aug. 16, FCYU will hold its 9th Annual Summer Writing Workshop at our office in Manhattan. Anyone 15 to 21 who lives in a group home, foster home or on a campus is eligible to apply. Those selected will write articles for publication in FCYU and will receive a \$400 stipend upon successful completion of the workshop. Space is limited, so apply early. For an application or more information, call 212-279-0708, ext. 113 or 114. Leave a message if you get the machine.

#### San Francisco:

we're also running a two week workshop for Bay Area foster teens, June 11-22. See ad page 38 for details.

**Deadline: May 25th**

## THE MENTAL HEALTH ISSUE

### Intro:

In this issue, FCYU looks at mental health issues facing youth in care: therapy, medication, and the emotions that confront young people who come from painful pasts. Mental health services are supposed to help youth deal with their pain, but sometimes the young people feel these services are inadequate or forced upon them. In the articles that follow, teens write about their experiences with therapy, medication, and social workers, giving praise where it's due and offering suggestions on what needs to be improved.

### Unexpressed Emotions Lead to Depression

In "In the Realm of Guilt and Sorrow," p. 2, Linda Rodriguez describes how depression, if kept in the closet or under covers, can be deadly. Growing up in a dysfunctional, violent family, Linda either tries to please her mother or blames herself for the problems. She becomes suicidal and enters a psychiatric hospital, where she slowly discovers the healing powers of expressing her feelings. (Story to be concluded in next issue.)

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Although there were many problems in her family and Linda wasn't treated right by her mother, she says she always tried to please her mother. Why do you think she tried to please her mother? What impact did trying to please her mother eventually have on Linda's mental

### 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 role plays are suggested for more active learning.



health?

—Linda would blame herself for the beatings her mother gave her. Why do you think children blame themselves for bad things their parents do to them? How did blaming herself affect Linda?

—How did Linda try to get her mother to notice her problems?

—Linda says, "I wanted help but I didn't want to let this stranger in." (Top of p. 4.) What is the stranger she is afraid of letting in? Why is she afraid to let him in?

—Circle a passage in Linda's story you can really relate to. Why do you relate so much to this part of her story?

—Instead of being the "nice, respectful, goody, goody girl," Linda lets out her anger and feels better when she expresses her true feelings. Why is it healthy for Linda to let out her anger? Why does she feel less depressed when

### 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.

### 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.

she expresses her true feelings?

#### Activity:

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Linda discovers that she begins to recover when she lets out her anger and expresses her feelings. Have the youth list three positive ways that someone who is depressed can get in touch with their feelings, and then three negative ways. (For example, talking to a family member in a direct way would be positive, getting verbally or physically violent with that person would not be positive.) Go around the room, list the suggestions on the board, and discuss.

#### Roleplay:

Linda and her mother. Linda's mother visits her in the hospital and blames her daughter for being there, calling her stupid. Linda respectfully but firmly stands up to her mother, refuses to take her abuse, and expresses her feelings about how she was treated in the family.

#### A Therapist Who Connected

Princess Carr, in "Keeping It Real," p. 8, has been in therapy since she was five years old, but it is not until she is a teenager that she finds the right one for her. Her therapist Andrea relates well to her and can make her laugh, but most of all she confronts Princess about her problems, doesn't let her hide, and pushes her to change. Therapy doesn't solve Princess's problems, but does help her gradually become stronger.

#### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Princess considers her first counselor, Lisa, to be more of a friend than a counselor. What makes a counselor or a therapist a friend? Is it always good for a counselor or therapist to be like a friend? Why or why not?

—Princess writes that sometimes her counselor Lisa was "too soft, too sweet. Once in a while I needed for her to crack so I could see that she was real." What does Princess mean by this? Do you agree with what she says? Why or why not?

—Princess says that her therapist Andrea didn't let her hide, but pushed and confronted her. What kinds of things do you think Andrea pushed or confronted Princess about? Why was that a good thing for Princess?

#### Activity:

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Princess describes the qualities she likes in a therapist: someone who can put her at ease and who can relate to her problems, but who also isn't afraid to confront her about her problems. Have the groups list three qualities that make a good therapist and three that make a bad one. Go around the room, list the suggestions on the board, and discuss.



#### Should Therapy Be Mandatory?

In "Get Outta My Head!" by Charlene Carter, p. 10, and "I Don't Talk on Demand" by Autumn Bush, p. 11, we hear from teens in foster care who do not want to be required to go to therapy. Autumn, for example, closed up about her feelings when she was forced to go.

#### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Should therapy be mandatory for youth in the system? Why or why not?

—What are the advantages of making therapy mandatory? What are the disadvantages?

—What makes therapy frightening?

—Write about a negative experience you had in therapy. Then, write about a positive experience you had.

—Write a short note to the authors, telling them whether you agree or disagree with therapy being mandatory. Explain why you feel that way.

#### Activity:

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Have the young people make a list of the reasons why young people may not want to go to therapy. Then have them come up with a second list of things that the system can do or that therapists can do to make therapy more appealing and less frightening. Go around the room, list the suggestions on the board, and discuss.

#### Dealing with Depression

In "When the Sadness Goes On and On," p. 12, Ijeoma Okolo interviews a therapist, who

describes how depression affects people and what they can do to deal with it.

#### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—The therapist interviewed says that kids who are depressed can get angry easily and get labeled as "bad kids." But the therapist says that she doesn't blame the young people for their misbehaviors, because they are acting that way for a reason. What is your reaction to this? Do young people "act bad" because of their feelings? What would help these young people to feel better about themselves and not act in a negative way? How do young people "get blamed" for their feelings? Did this ever happen to you?

—Write about a time you acted out or did something bad because you were feeling sad or depressed. What were you sad about? How did you act out? Looking back, are you pleased with the way you behaved? In there another, more positive way, you could have expressed what you were feeling?

—Many things can help with depression: keeping a journal, music, painting, drawing, exercise. What things do you do when you're depressed? How do they help?

—Not facing your pain can do more harm than good. Do you feel you've been able to face and begin to work through your pain? How do you do it? If not, what might help you do so?

#### Are Foster Kids Overmedicated?

Gloria Williams, in "A Hard Pill to Swallow," p. 14, and Renee John in "No More Refills," p. 17, discuss their experiences with taking medication to deal with depression. Gloria is on many kinds of medication and experiences a range of physical and psychological side-effects. A doctor finally takes her off medication and Gloria never wants to go on it again. Renee has more mixed feelings: she's glad she didn't become too dependent on meds when she was in the system, because now that she's out she can't afford them. On the other hand, she wonders if she would be in a better mental state today if she had been on medication earlier. And in "What Are They Thinking?" on p. 18, several FCYU writers interview a psychiatrist for his point of view on therapy and medication.



### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Some people think youth in foster care are overmedicated because “it’s easier to give a child a pill than to talk to that child.” What is your reaction to this? Is medication a good way to help people deal with their problems? When is it good and when is it destructive?

—Should medication be voluntary? Would that make kids more open to taking it? Why or why not?

—When should medication be mandatory? Are there times when a youth should not have the right to say no to medication? What are those times?

—Do you have any personal experiences with medication that you’d like to share? Were your experiences positive or negative? Why?

—Some kids who refuse medication end up “medicating themselves” with drugs or alcohol. Is there a difference between using drugs and alcohol, and using an approved medication, like Prozac? Which is the better way of dealing with emotions. Why?



## GOODBYE AND GOOD LUCK: LEAVING THE SYSTEM, pps. 18-21.

### Intro:

Too often, young people who leave the system are not only unprepared to feed, clothe, and house themselves, but to deal with the emotional consequences of their years in care. These stories address that inner struggle.

### The Hard Struggle for Independence

In “The Long Road to Independence,” p. 22, Charlene Carter interviews Sharon Karow, an adult who grew up in foster care. Sharon was separated from her siblings and felt lonely and ashamed living in a foster home. But she overcame her difficulties to earn a college degree and form healthy relationships.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—When she left foster care, Sharon had a hard time forming relationships and didn’t have many job skills. But she overcame these problems to become successful in both work and

marriage. What problems do you think you will face when you leave foster care? What are you doing now to try to face those problems?

—When she left the system, Sharon struggled with a fear of being alone. One thing that helped her was living in a boarding house with other women. Think of a fear or problem you think you’ll have when you leave foster care. Then think of a something you can do to help you deal with that fear.

—Getting married gave Sharon a sense of purpose. List three things that might help give you a sense of purpose when you leave foster care. Do these goals seem realistic to you? Why or why not?

### Activity:

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Have the teens make a list of their fears about leaving foster care. They have them make a second list of things they will do to try to deal with those fears, either while they’re still in the system or after they leave. Go around the room, list the suggestions on the board, and discuss.

### Shedding Emotional Baggage

In “Getting Back to You,” p. 24, Craig Jaffe, a former foster youth now living on his own and supporting himself, describes how he was still emotionally dependent on the system after he left it. He hadn’t learned how to be alone with himself and his experiences. By taking long walks, he was able to reflect on his past, work on his problems, and set goals for his future. For Craig, being independent is not just getting a job, saving money, and learning to cook, but also “what you do for yourself on the inside.”

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Craig says he was still “emotionally dependent” on the system after he left it. What does he mean by “emotionally dependent”? Can you relate to what he says about that? Why or why not?

—Why is working on the “inside stuff”—your feelings about foster care and the past—as important as working on the “outside stuff”—learning to cook, hold a job, etc.? Is one more important than the other? Why or why not?

—Craig talks about putting “closure” on the past when you leave foster care. What does “closure” mean? Why is it hard to do? Do you see yourself putting “closure” on the past? Why or why not?

—Write a short letter to Craig, telling him what you think of the things he’s done to become independent from his foster care past.

### Activity:

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Craig took long walks to think back on his past and try to put it behind him and set goals for the future. Have the teens make a list of things they could do (it could be writing in a journal,

talking to a close friend, exercise, etc.) to put the past behind them and set future goals. Go around the room, list the suggestions on the board, and discuss.

### Roleplay:

Craig and a friend. Craig’s friend has just left foster care, has a lot of anger, and blames the system for ruining his life. Craig wants him to know there are steps he can take to put the past behind him, take responsibility for his future, and move forward.



## SPOTLIGHT ON SOCIAL WORKERS, pps. 30-33.

### Intro:

Social workers play crucial roles in the lives of foster youth. In this section, youth in care discuss what works in their relations with social workers, and what could be improved.

### What Youth Want from their Workers

In “Here Today, Gone Tomorrow,” p. 20, Charlene Carter describes the turmoil she and her fellow group home residents experience when a caring, respected social worker leaves the agency. And in “If I Were a Social Worker,” pps. 32-33, foster youth offer a variety of suggestions on how social workers can better relate to their clients.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Why is Mrs. Heyward such a good social worker? Describe three qualities she has that cause youth to respect her.

—How does Mrs. Heyward handle problems in the group home differently from the other social workers? Why do you think this method works so well?

—When Mrs. Heyward leaves the agency, Charlene’s entire group home is affected. Have you had a similar experience in the system?

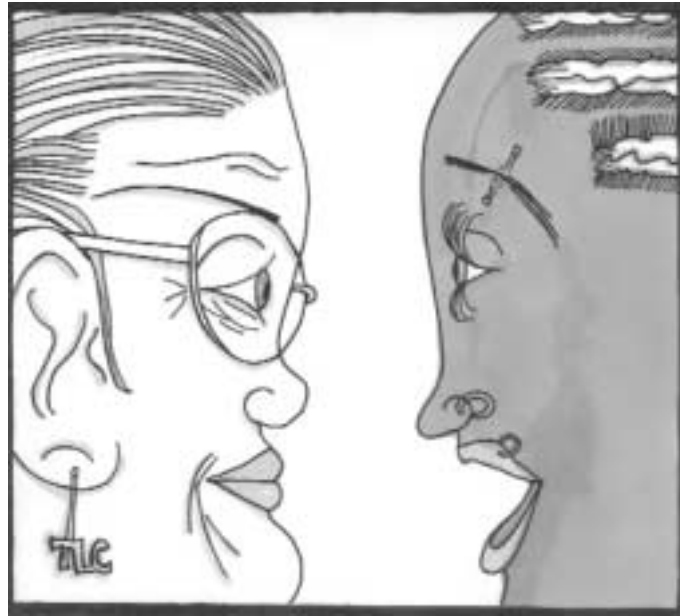
—Charlene says that when kids in the system feel uncared for, they act out. What could

be done to make kids feel more cared for?

—A fact of life is that people change jobs. What could be done to help foster youth deal with the painful feelings they experience when an adult they like leaves the agency?

**Activity:**

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Have the groups read the suggestions for social workers on pps. 32-33. The groups should then try to agree on the three most important suggestions made by the teens. Then have them make a second list of new suggestions they would make, to improve relations with social workers. Go around the room, list the suggestions on the board, and discuss.



**Prompts for discussion and/or writing:**

—Denise is sent back to her family after nine years in the system without any counseling or other preparations. What is your reaction to that?

—Denise does drugs and has a baby to win her mom's love. But her mother doesn't love her any more than before. Have you ever been in a similar situation, where you did something negative or that you weren't ready for, to win someone's affection? What happened? Would you do the same thing again? Why or why not?

—What makes Denise finally decide to give up drugs?

—How does Denise's daughter Chloe act when she goes back to live with her mother? Why does she act that way?

**ON THE LIGHTER SIDE: WHO'S YOUR FAVORITE DIVA?**, pps. 31-33.

Roberto Fantauzzi, in "The Latin Diva Strikes Again," p. 27, writes about his admiration for Jennifer Lopez, the Latin Diva.

**Prompts for discussion and/or writing:**

—Who's your favorite musical star and why?

—Jennifer Lopez called her first album "On the 6," to express a part of her past—taking the #6 subway from the Bronx to Manhattan for singing lessons when she was just starting out. Pretend you've made your first album. What would you call it, to express something personal about yourself?

—Jennifer Lopez makes Roberto proud to be Puerto Rican. Is there a musical star who makes you proud of something about you? Who is the performer and what does she make you feel proud about?

**Activity:**

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Have the teens make lists of their favorite musical artists. Go around the room, list the artists on the board, and debate who are the best and why.

**A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE**, p. 34.

**Intro:**

In this section, biological parents write about what was happening in their lives when they lost their kids, what they did to try to get their kids back, and how the system helped or hurt their families.

**Breaking the Cycle of Bad Parenting**

In "I Love My Children Enough To Be Different from My Own Mom" by Denise Lee, p. 34, the author writes about how she vowed to be different from her mother, who had Denise when she was only 15. But Denise gets pregnant at 15 and has an abortion. When she returns to her mother from foster care, they start doing drugs together. Denise has a child when she's 20, but loses her to the system because of her drug abuse. Eventually Denise enters drug rehab, gets her child back, and vows to be a better parent than her mother was.

**Roleplay #1:**

Denise and her mother. Denise's mother doesn't think she's done anything wrong in the past and doesn't want to change her behavior. Denise wants her mother to know how she was harmed by her behavior. Denise also wants her mother to know how she is going to be a different mother.

**Roleplay #2:**

Denise and her daughter Chloe, who is back living with Denise. Chloe is angry at her mother because she had to go into the system. Denise wants to explain to her why that happened, and how she is going to be a better mother in the future.

*Foster Care Youth United is published by Youth Communication, 224 W. 29th St., New York, NY 10001 212-279-0708 x. 113 or 114*

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*Tips is provided free to all bulk subscribers (5 copies or more). Extra copies of Tips can also be downloaded from [youthcomm.org](http://youthcomm.org) under teacher resources.*

*FCYU is published in a national edition and a California edition (most stories appear in both editions).*

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)