



Tips for Staff

How to Use *Foster Care Youth United*:

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

In This Issue:

Taking About Sexual Abuse

Introduction

In the following articles, two *FCYU* writers address the issue of sexual abuse. Our experience at Youth Communication is that most teens in the system have been abused at one time or another—before coming into care, while in care, or in a dating situation. These stories can help you raise these issues with teens in your program so they can begin or continue their healing process.

See No Evil

In “Eyes Wide Shut,” p. 2, the writer describes the nightmare of not only living with a father who physically and sexually abuses her, but of being left unprotected by family members who knew what was going on. She goes into foster care and loses her relationship with her grandmother, who believes she betrayed the family by telling the truth. An accompanying article, “When Loved Ones Don’t Listen,” p. 6, looks at why family members deny that sexual abuse is happening and how the child is affected.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Were you ever in a situation similar to the writer’s, where your family turned a blind eye to problems you were having? How did you feel about it at the time? How has not being believed affected you today?

—The writer felt loved by her grandmother. But her grandmother knew what was going on in the family and did little to stop it. Why do you think her grandmother didn’t do more to stop the abuse? What do you think the grandmother should have done?

—The writer’s grandmother dealt with the problems in the house by taking her out to have fun. Although the writer loved her grandmother, sometimes she was also angry at her, for not doing more to protect her from her father. Did you ever feel both love and anger toward someone, because that person was close to you, but also did little to protect you? What was it like to have those mixed feelings? Looking back now, do you feel more love or anger toward that person? Why?

—How did not being protected and believed as a child affect the author as she grew older?

—A time came when the writer couldn’t hold in her secrets any longer. Did a time come in your life when you couldn’t keep family secrets any more? Why did you decide to speak up, and what happened when you did? How were you affected by speaking up? How was the family affected?

—The writer’s grandmother rejects her because she spoke up about the abuse. Did a family member ever reject you because you told the truth about the family? Why did the family member react that way?



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.

Were you ever able to patch up your relationship with that person? Why or why not?

—What strengths does the writer discover about herself, that she never knew she had? What strengths have you discovered about yourself as a result of your family experiences?

Roleplay:

Two teens, playing the writer and her grandmother. The grandmother believes she betrayed the family by speaking up about the abuse. The writer thinks she did what was right for herself and her family.



Stopping the Abuse

Alene Taylor, in “Mommy’s Little Girl” (p. 8), is sexually abused by her stepfather for two years. When Alene speaks up, her mother rejects her and puts her into foster care. Despite the pain, Alene feels liberated from having to please mom and live a lie.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Alene doesn’t know which was worse: being sexually abused by her stepfather, or being rejected by her family when she spoke up about it. Which do you think is worse? Why?

—Alene is tempted to tell her mother about the abuse, but she holds it in because she puts her mother’s happiness ahead of what she needs. Have you ever kept quiet about or tolerated a problem you were having in your family, because you wanted to keep someone happy or were afraid of hurting that person? How did that make you feel at the time, to put someone’s needs ahead of your own? How are you affected by that today?

—Alene finally stands up to her mother and tells the truth about her situation. How does Alene’s mother react? Why do you think she reacts that way?

—Alene writes, “Although it hurt, it was also a relief to accept that my mom just wasn’t

there for me.” Why is it a relief for Alene to accept that fact? Have you ever had similar feelings about a family member? Why?

—Alene feels very hurt when her family, after finding out what happened to her, says nothing to her about it. Alene writes: “The truth is, I cringe every time they neglect to bring it up.” Have you ever had to face family silence about something bad that happened to you? Why was the silence painful to you? Were you ever able to break that silence? Why or why not?

—Wanting love from her family but not getting it led Alene into many bad relationships. How did your family upbringing affect the relationships in your life?

—By trying to be a “good girl,” Alene had to push away the bad feelings she felt toward her mother. What impact do you think this had on her, and on her relations with people outside her family?

—Alene said she felt liberated when she was allowed to “feel her feelings,” including her hurt and anger. What does Alene mean by that? Growing up in her family, what happened to Alene’s feelings, and how did that affect her?

—Alene says, “Now I’m more able to say, there’s no excuse for what happened to me and there’s no need for me to keep on being hurt, either.” Alene seems to be saying that she’s found a middle ground between accepting the abuse, and being angry. How do you think Alene found that middle ground? Have you found a similar middle ground in your own life? What is it?

Roleplay:

Two teens, playing Alene and her mother. Alene’s mother thinks the abuse is Alene’s fault.

Alene wants her mother to know the truth about the past and about Alene today.

Spirituality

In several stories and a speakout, the writers look at the role of God and spirituality in their lives. This is obviously a sensitive topic, and one where it is very important to avoid value judgments. Teens have varying levels of belief and non-belief, and so do staff. And those beliefs are often deeply personal. One goal in discussing each of these stories should be to help teens explore their own spirituality and beliefs, whatever they are, and how they help sustain them. Before discussing these stories, it would be good to imagine a teen who has beliefs that are very different from yours, e.g., an atheist, a Wiccan, a Muslim—and thinking about how you can be respectful and supportive of the teen, regardless of the differences in your outlook.

Hello God, Are You There?

The anonymous writer of “Hello God, Are You There,” p. 15, describes a religious journey from Christianity, to Wicca, back to the Bible, and then a period of doubt again, which is where she is now. This is a good account of a teen trying to use religion to make sense of the difficult circumstances she has faced.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—The writer first loses faith in God when she is kicked out of a foster home. Why do people sometimes lose or question their faith

Three Ways Your Teens Can Get Published

1) Writing contest: See p. 29. We offer \$175 in prizes. This month’s topic:

“Do You Think the Foster Care System Should Focus More on Placing Kids in Good Foster Homes and Group Homes, or Getting Biological Families Help (like Counseling or Drug Treatment) to Stay Together? Why?”

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 **June 25**.

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. 12-13. 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.



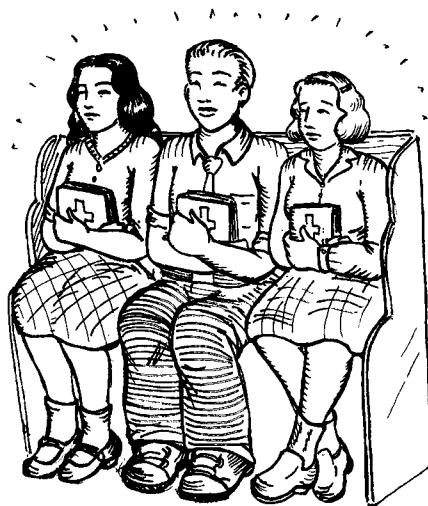
John Gaston

when hard things happen to them?

—Later, the writer becomes a Wiccan, because one of its premises is that you can do anything, as long as you don't harm anyone. What makes that a good rule for living? What might be problems with it?

—When the writer reads *Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul*, in which many writers describe the rough times in their lives, and still believe in God, she changes her view of God. Do you think God should protect us from hardship? Or is hardship an inevitable part of life, maybe a part that tests our faith?

—The writer says her beliefs helped her become less judgmental of others. God was also like a friend she could talk to. How can faith in God help someone become less judgmental? In what ways can God be a friend?



Shaun Shishido

He's No Father of Mine

In "He's No Father of Mine," p. 18, Jackie Knight explains why she doesn't believe in God. She has several reasons. She points out that the earth is much older than the Bible story says it is. She also reacts against the Bible and God as authority figures. She doesn't think a loving God would create a place like hell, or allow the daily cruelties that occur in the world.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Many people who accept modern scientific explanations of the origins of the earth, evolution, etc. also believe in God. Jackie says that's not logical. Does faith have to be logical?

—Jackie says that a God who could send bad children to hell is like an abusive father. And she thinks God has some responsibility to protect people from "life's harsh realities." Is a God that punishes people or fails to protect them from pain abusive? Why or why not?

Roleplay (for this story and the previous one):

Two teens. One thinks that if there was a God, he would never allow so much suffering in the world. The other teen thinks that suffering has a purpose, and is not a sign that God does not care.

Keeping the Faith: God Saw Me Though My Hardest Times

In "Keeping the Faith," p. 20, by Theresa Dottin, her faith is tested at age 12 when her grandmother dies and she feels angry and hurt,

and wonders why God does not protect her from abuse over the next several years. By the time she is 17, however, Theresa starts finding comfort again in the Bible, and when she is 18 she is born again.

—What does Theresa mean when she says, "You don't just throw your problems on God and walk away. You also open your heart to receive."?

—Theresa says reading Christian authors brings her strength, peace, and joy. Has religion ever had that effect on you? Have any other activities or friendships helped you to feel that way?

—Theresa is troubled by the rules of her religion, especially about abstaining from sex, and she wrestles with them, and often breaks them. Does that make her less religious or worthy in the eyes of God?

—Lisa repents her sins when she learns that her child may have a birth defect. Are there things you've done that you regret, and for which you would like to be forgiven. Who can forgive you? Can you forgive yourself? If you could feel less shame and guilt about those acts, how would your life change?

—Like Jackie Knight, Theresa questions God when terrible things happen to her. But unlike Jackie, she later finds comfort in God. Why do you think Theresa and Jackie have different views and experiences of God?

Roleplay (for this story and the previous one):

Two teens. One thinks that if there was a God, he would never allow so much suffering. The other teen thinks that suffering has a purpose, and is not a sign that God does not care.

Foster Care and the Juvenile Justice System

Many studies show that an unusually high number of teens in foster care also get in trouble with the law, and that an unusually high number of kids in juvenile homes were also in foster care at one time. No one really knows whether being in foster care makes kids more likely to get in trouble, or if all the trouble they've seen which results in them going into foster care also makes it more likely for them to get in trouble with the law.

With the help of *The Beat Within*, the Bay Area writing project run by Pacific News Service, we surveyed 200 teens behind bars about their foster care experiences, and their feelings about the link between foster care and juvenile justice.

One in 10 of the teens we surveyed had

been in foster care. Many of the teens had opinions about the links between foster care and getting locked up. These stories provide much food for thought for teens and for staff.

—Some people say that foster kids get treated like criminals in ways that regular kids do not. For example, if two kids in a family get in a fight, their parents usually break it up. But if two kids in a group home get in a fight, the police might be called, and the kids locked up. Do your teens or staff think that situations like that make it more likely that foster teens might get jailed?

—Studies show that being abused and neglected make it much more likely that someone will get involved in crime. Since all kids in foster care have been abused and neglected, should special efforts be made to help them avoid getting arrested? What could agencies do? What could teens do?



John Gaston

My Life as a Thug

In “My Life as a Thug,” (p. 26) Patrick Akinngabe describes falling into a life of crime. He says had had caring foster parents, but the anger of the abuse and losing his biological parents overwhelmed him, and he began not to care about the people he mugged. However, he’s eventually arrested, which scares him straight.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Patrick says he was usually a good kid, but that off and on he’d get an “I don’t care,” attitude. Later, when he was jacking people, he’d go into the “I don’t care,” feelings to avoid facing what he was doing to his victims. Is it possible to be a good kid in one part of your life, and a bad kid in another part?

—Why do you think Patrick is able to rob and hurt people—and then sell drugs in his community—even when he knows it’s wrong?

—Patrick says he had a good foster parents for lots of years. Do you think there’s anything else that adults could have done to help Patrick avoid getting into crime, or was it going to happen no matter what? If there was something adults could have done, what is it? If you

think his “crime phase” was inevitable, why?

—Patrick says his crime days are over. Do you believe him? If so, what makes you believe him? What things have made it possible for him to change (in his situation and in his own attitudes). If not, why don’t you believe he’s really changed?

—If Patrick is going to stay out of jail in the future, what are the most important things he’ll have to do? What do you think will be his greatest temptations?

Roleplay:

Patrick and a member of his old gang. The gang member tells Patrick they’re going out to jack some people, and invites Patrick to come along. Patrick doesn’t want to go.

My Little Bouts With the Law

Mariah Lopez is the group home child from hell (“My Little Bouts with the Law,” p. 30). She has a “lengthy” record of skipping school, acting out, insulting staff, going AWOL, and more.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Mariah says that the root of her problems was that she was, “trying to find a place where I belonged.” Trying to find that place led her to risky places, taking drugs, and bouncing from placement to placement. Do other foster teens face a similar problem—that they never really feel “right” in their placements? If so, how does that affect their behavior? Could agencies and staff (and foster parents) do more to make young people feel more comfortable with their placements? Or do teens just have to keep bouncing until they find what’s right for them?

Activity:

Each teen describes or writes a list of items that would make a placement feel right for them. Teens compare lists. They also compare what is on their lists with the actual conditions of their placement. Do the lists suggest any changes that could be made? Discuss with staff.

Confessions of a Reformed Player

In “Confessions of a Reformed Player,” p. 33, Antwaun Garcia writes about his struggle to figure out what kinds of relationships will be truly satisfying for him, emotionally, not just sexually. At first, all he wants is sex, and he treats women badly. As he matures, he realizes that he wants someone who he can talk to, who understands him, who he can really fall in love



Karolina Zambienko

with. That changes his whole attitude toward women and dating—and himself.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—When Antwaun starts to realize he wants more than sex in a relationship, he has a problem. Every time he starts getting really close to a female, he says, he can’t tell them how he really feels. Why can’t he? How do you feel about expressing your real feelings to someone you are fond of?

—When Antwaun really falls in love for the first time, it’s with a girl he’s known since elementary school. Why do you think this is the person he really falls for? How does he treat her differently than the girls he didn’t care about as much?

—Teens in foster care have been let down by lots of people who were supposed to love them. Do you think that makes it harder for them to open up in a relationship? What are they protecting? What do they gain by not opening up? What do they lose?

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