



# Foster Care Youth United TIPS

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

May/June 2001

## Writing contest:

See p. 13. We offer \$175 in prizes. This month's topic: "What Do You Think Will Be Your Biggest Challenge About Living Independently? Why?" Ask the young people to be specific and to explain their reasons. The deadline is July 15.

## 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.

### 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.

### 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.

## **THIS ISSUE'S THEME: PREGNANCY, PARENTING, AND BIRTH CONTROL**

### Intro:

In this issue, FCYU looks at the issues of pregnancy and contraception in foster care. One young woman opts for abortion, while another gives up her baby daughter for adoption. Readers express their views on what a teen should do if she becomes pregnant before she's ready. And another writer looks at birth control and sex education denied to teens in care. Whatever your beliefs, we hope these stories shed light on an overlooked side of teen pregnancy—how to help a teen if she does become pregnant.

### A Difficult Decision

In "Abortion: It Was the Right Choice for Me," p. 2, Lakia Holmes describes how she swore she'd never become a teen mom, but then found herself pregnant at 16 after not using condoms one time. She wrestles with what to do, and, realizing she is unable to care for a child or to give it away, chooses abortion.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

- Why does Lakia feel she cannot keep the baby and raise it herself?
- Why does Lakia decide against giving her baby up for adoption?
- Why does Lakia at first feel that abortion is wrong?
- Why does Lakia change her mind about abortion?
- Circle a passage in Lakia's story that you either strongly agree with or disagree with. Explain why you agree or disagree with this passage.
- If you were in Lakia's shoes, what would you have done?
- Lakia doesn't think abortion is wrong, but she does worry that some young women use it "as a form of birth control." What is your opinion about abortion? Do you agree or disagree that some young women use it "as birth control"?



### Activity:

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Have each pair or group come up with a list of ideas for preventing unwanted pregnancies among teens (such as TV ads, better community clinics, better sex education, etc.) Have them go into detail about their ideas, not just say "better sex ed." Go around the room, list the suggestions on the board, and discuss.

## Summer Writing Workshop:

Write for FCYU and earn a stipend: This summer, from July 9 to Aug. 16, FCYU will hold its 9<sup>th</sup> 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.

### Join Our Staff!

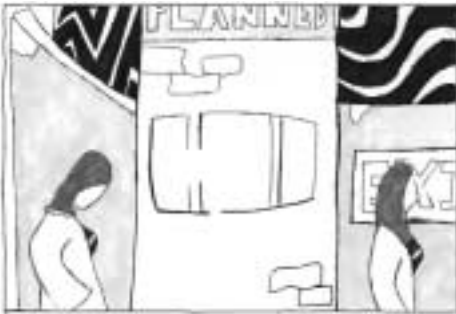
**Write for FCYU:** We need writers for our program, which meets after school in Manhattan. Writers of every ability receive careful, professional attention from adult editors. School credit can be arranged. For information, call Kendra at 212-279-0708, ext. 114, or Rachel at ext. 113.

### Roleplay:

Two teens, playing Lakia and a friend. Lakia's friend thinks Lakia should either raise the baby herself, or give the baby up for adoption. Lakia believes she can't raise the child alone, and would be too attached to the baby to give it up for adoption.

### Abortion as Birth Control?

Karolina Kwiatkowska, in "Abortion Isn't Birth Control," p. 5, thinks too many teens are being sexually irresponsible. They don't like using condoms or birth control, figuring it's no big deal because they'll get an abortion if they become pregnant. Karolina accuses them of using abortion as birth control.



### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Karolina feels that too many teens are being irresponsible by not using birth control when they have sex. Do you agree or disagree with Karolina that this is a big problem? Why or why not?

—Karolina feels that many teens don't worry about getting pregnant because they'll just get an abortion. She thinks teens are using abortion as birth control. What does she mean by this, and do you agree or disagree? Why?

—If abortions were harder to get, would teens be more cautious about having sex and more likely to use birth control? Why or why not?

### Activity:

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Teens say they don't like using birth control because sex doesn't feel the same or because it's too much of a hassle to use. Have the pairs or groups come up with a list of ideas for ways



teens could be persuaded to use birth control. Have them be specific in their ideas. Go around the room, list the suggestions on the board, and discuss.

### Catholic Agencies and Birth Control

In "Dangerous Doctrine," p. 6, Princess Carr describes how many Catholic foster care agencies, because of religious belief, do not provide their residents with contraception or information about abortion. Princess believes youth in care should not be subjected to other people's religious beliefs, and that they need access to contraception and abortion information in order to practice safe sex and make responsible decisions.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Has your agency provided you with information on contraception and birth control? Are you happy with the information you received? Why or why not?

—Does your agency provide you with sex education classes? Are you happy with the quality of these classes? Why or why not?

—Princess believes that if sex is discussed openly with young people, they might decide to wait to have sex. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

### Activity:

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Tell each pair or group that they are in charge of designing a new sex education program in their school/agency. The goal of the program is to provide quality information that teens will take seriously, with the goal of reducing STDs, unwanted pregnancies, and irresponsible sex. Each pair/group should write down how their program works, how the classes are taught, what information is given out, etc. They should be specific in their suggestions. Go around the room, list the suggestions on the board, and discuss.

### What Should a Pregnant Teen Do?

This month's writing contest winners, p. 14, give advice on what a pregnant teen should

do if she isn't ready to become a mother.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Write a letter to the contest winner with whom you agree the most. Explain why you agree with that person's opinion.

—Write a letter to the contest winner with whom you disagree the most. Explain why you disagree with that person's opinion.

—If you were pregnant and not ready to be a mother, what would your decision be?

### Why?

—Why do so many teens have unwanted pregnancies? What might prevent unwanted pregnancies among teens?

## A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE, p. 10.

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.

### Giving Up a Child for Adoption

In "A Family to Raise Her" by Jennifer Jeanne Olsensky, p. 10, the author writes about how she became pregnant at 14 and gave the baby up for adoption after she knew she couldn't provide the child with a good life. Jennifer feels she did what was right and has no regrets.

### Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Why does Jennifer turn to her boyfriend for love at age 14?

—What was Jennifer in denial about concerning her boyfriend? Why do you think she was in denial?

—Do you think Jennifer made the right decision in giving her baby up for adoption? Why or why not?

—If you were Jennifer's child, and you were given up for adoption, would you like to see Jennifer again some day? Why or why not? If so, what questions would you have for her.

—Write a short note to Jennifer, telling her what you think of her decision to give up her baby daughter for adoption.

### Roleplay:

Two teens, playing Jennifer and a friend. Jennifer's friend thinks it's better that she keep the baby, even if she has to raise the child as a single mother. Jennifer believes she can't provide the baby with a quality life, and that adoption is the best alternative.

## **FOSTER YOUTH WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

On pps. 16-19, we publish excerpts from the five Grand Prize winning essays in this year's Awards for Youth in Foster Care. The goal of the contest is to promote a more accurate image of foster youth among agency staff, youth workers, and the general public. In these excerpts, the winners describe how they have helped others.

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

—Which is your favorite essay? Why?

—Cynthia Aponte (p. 16) starts a Big Sister program to help freshmen in her high school because she knew how hard it was for her as a freshman. Describe a time you helped someone who was going through something you once went through.

—Lishone Bowsky (p. 17) says she didn't learn the value of helping others until people began to help her. Describe a time when someone helped you, and how it changed the way you treated others.

—Chnita Campbell (p. 18) teaches a teen to read. Describe a time when you taught someone a skill you had. What happened, and how did it feel to help that person?

—Jequetta Hill (p. 18) volunteers at a local police precinct because she is interested in law enforcement and wants to become a police officer and FBI agent someday. Describe a volunteer experience you had in the past and explain why you chose to volunteer there or describe a volunteer experience you would like to have in the future.

—Qwonjit Nelson (p. 20) says that by helping her younger sisters grow up, she is also helping herself grow. What does Qwonjit mean by this? How can helping someone else end up helping you? Describe a time when you helped yourself by helping others.

## **DEALING WITH ABUSE AND DEPRESSION**

### **The Trauma of Abuse**

In "Mom, Why Didn't You Listen," p. 22, the anonymous writer describes how she was abused by her stepfather, but afraid to tell her mother for fear of not being believed. Even after the writer is removed from the home and goes into foster care, her mother refuses to believe what happened and blames her daughter for "breaking up the family."

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

—When the abuse began, why didn't the writer tell her mother?

—How did the writer try to deal with the abuse by herself?

—Why didn't the writer run away from the house?

—Why do you think the writer's mother

turned a blind eye and refused to admit what was going on?

—The writer says she is the only one who is pushing to make her family come together, but it's not working. She says she won't stop, even if she's the only one working at it. Do you think she should stop trying to make her family work? Why or why not?

—Pretend you're the writer. Write a short



letter to your mother, explaining what happened in the past and why she should admit what happened and not deny it.

### **Roleplay:**

Two teens, playing the writer and her mother. The writer's mother doesn't believe the abuse happened and blames the writer for "breaking up the family." The writer wants her mother to admit the truth about what really happened.

### **Unexpressed Emotions Lead To Depression**

In her conclusion to "In the Realm of Guilt and Sorrow," p. 30, Linda Rodriguez describes how she grew up feeling responsible for all her family's problems. This leads to depression and time in a psychiatric hospital. Then she rebels from her years of silent submission by partying and staying out late. When she sees a therapist, she is able to confront and uncover the painful truth of her past.

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

—Why did Linda tell the courts that her mother never beat her?

—Linda was never allowed to express her feelings at home, so when she goes to live with her grandmother, she starts acting wild. Yet she still feels depressed. Why?

—Why does Linda have trouble telling the whole truth in therapy? Why does she eventually stop going to therapy?

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

—What does Linda finally admit to herself? How does admitting these things make

her feel?

—What is Linda's most important insight into her relationship with her family? What does she learn about her ability to control things? Try to summarize what she learned in a few sentences.

### **Roleplay:**

Two teens, playing Linda and her mother. Linda's mother visits her and says she treated Linda the way she did because she had a hard life. Linda understands her mother had a hard life, but that doesn't excuse the way she treated Linda.

## **BUILDING LIFE SKILLS**

pps. 33-35.

### **Intro:**

Too often, young people leave the system unprepared to feed, clothe, and house themselves because they don't have the skills for a good job. In this section, Charlene describes strategies for moving beyond minimum wage jobs after leaving foster care.

### **Minimum Wage Forever?**

In "McDonald's: Planning for Your Future?," p. 22, Charlene Carter talks about how teens in foster care start out working at minimum wage jobs while in the system, but don't plan ahead and end up stuck in these dead-end jobs. Charlene urges teens to think "more long term" and explore internships, volunteer opportunities, and paid jobs to acquire the skills they need to do well after leaving care. In "How to Find an Internship," p. 34, Charlene explains what they are and how to get them.



Activity:

Youth can work individually, in pairs or in small groups. Have each youth/pair/group list the following: 1) something they enjoy doing, 2) what kind of job they could get in this field, 3) an adult they can talk to about this field, and 4) an adult already working in this field who they can talk to. Go around the room, list the responses on the board, and discuss.

**ON THE LIGHTER SIDE: MUSIC and FASHION**, pps. 26-29 and 36-37.

**The Rapture of Rap (and Rock)**

Oumar Bowman, in "The Rapture of Rap," and Gloria Williams in "Staind: It's All So Twisted...", pp. 26-29, describe how music helps them to understand and express their emotions. For Oumar, hard-core rap reflects his anger and frustration at life's rude awakenings, but he also enjoys slower, more romantic music. Gloria listened to nothing but rap until a friend turned her on to rock, and now she is a die-hard fan of grunge and metal.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—What's your favorite music and why? How does it help you release or deal with your emotions?

—Oumar loves rap, but also enjoys slow jams. Gloria only listened to rap at first, but later developed an interest in rock. Do you also like several types of music? Or do you prefer listening to just one? Why?

—Have you ever had to hide a musical interest from friends or peers because you were afraid of what they might think? Or are you up front about what you like in music, regardless of other people's opinions?

Activity:

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Have the teens write out lyrics from their favorite artists that best capture their feelings and personalities. Go around the room, have the young people either perform or recite the lyrics, and discuss.

Roleplay:

Two teens, playing a rap lover and a rock lover (or another kind of music other than rap). The rap lover can't understand how anyone could listen to any music besides rap. The other teen defends her love of rock and thinks rap is overrated and too violent.



**Obsessed with Dress**

Ijeoma Okolo, in "Totally Overwhelmed with Fashion," p. 36, writes about how her loneliness as a child and her thirst for attention led her to develop an addiction for designer clothes. She resorts to wearing her brother's name-brand outfits and fabricates her own bootleg versions of famous labels.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Is the obsession with name-brand clothes a good or a bad thing? Has it gone too far, or is it just a normal part of being a teen? Why?

—Kids tease Ijeoma for not wearing designer fashions. What is your reaction to this? Have you ever been teased like that? Or have you or your friends teased others?

—Because she has a limited budget for clothes, Ijeoma has to be creative in what she buys and how she dresses. How have you been creative in putting together your wardrobe?

—What can people tell about you from the way you dress? How do your clothes reflect your personality?

—Ijeoma feels like a sex object when she starts dressing like other girls, and eventually dresses more to please herself than others. Is fashion, for you, more about trying to fit in with others, or more about trying to please yourself? Why?

Activity:

Youth can work in pairs or in small groups. Pretend that your group's principal has proposed a new dress policy to cut down on the "fashion show atmosphere" in school: from now on, the principal wants all students to wear uniforms. Have the pairs or small groups respond in writing to the principal's proposal. Go around the room, list the responses on the board, and discuss.

Roleplay:

Two teens. Teen #1 wears expensive name-brand clothes and thinks anyone who doesn't is low-class and dumb. Teen #2 doesn't wear expensive clothes, thinks those who do are wasting their money, and doesn't care what anyone thinks about the way she dresses.

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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 in the Teacher Resources section.*

*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