

Therapists and Social Workers: Lessons You Can Use With Teens

This issue of *Represent* focuses on relationships between foster parents and teens in care. The stories present a great opportunity to talk to teens about how to cope with abuse, how to advocate for getting out of a bad placement, and how to build strong, positive relationships with good foster parents and other caring adults.

Understanding Through Therapy

Mistreatment by a parent or foster parent can mess with a person's understanding of himself or herself. The following exercises can help the group explore how abuse encountered in care changes them and how they can acknowledge those changes and make better decisions.

- Ask the teens to read "The Freedom to Be Me" (p. 15) by Anonymous and "The Mysteries of Faith" (p. 17) by Dominick Freeman and mark places where foster parents' abuse leads to low self-esteem in the teen—e.g., Anonymous changes the way he walks and talks (p. 15), and Dominick confesses to a crime he did not commit (p. 18). Then ask the group to share times they internalized bad things abusive caregivers said about them. Were they able to work through those misperceptions to get back their self-esteem? How?

- In "A World of Other People's Rules" (p. 22), Joy Hollins writes about the frustration of adapting to new rules in each of her 16 foster homes. She acts out against the rules like "no gum" and "no whistling." But through therapy she begins to realize that the rules aren't really the issue. Rather, they trigger feelings of abandonment by parents and foster parents. Therapy also helps her communicate with her new foster family, her doctor, and her teachers rather than acting out. Ask the teens to share some constructive ways *they've* learned to cope with anger, hurt, and instability in their lives.

Being Heard

Unfortunately, too many youth experience marginal foster parents, or biological parents, who are abusive or neglectful. Sometimes there's no repairing a bad relationship; sometimes you just have to get yourself out of there to protect your physical and/or mental health.

- Ask the teens what you can do if you have a bad placement. Get a variety of responses and write them on the board. Then tell them you're going to read some stories in which teens used specific strategies to achieve their goal of a better placement.

- Read "Rewriting the Script" (p. 7) by Alex Withers and "Treat Me the Same" (p. 4) by Shantae Mearis. Ask the teens what they think of Alex's and Shantae's advocacy strategies. Did they get what they wanted? Why? What other ways of advocating could also have been effective? What might not have worked, or even made things worse?

Starting on the Right Foot—and Staying There

Fortunately, there are good foster parents out there, and this lets students work on relationship-building. Ashley Rivera's interview with her foster mother "My Foster Mother Is a Role Model," (p. 20), and Teresa H.'s story, "Gaining a Family," (p. 12), show how a foster parent might welcome a young person into a foster home and support them over the longer term.

- Before they read the stories, ask students to list respectful, kind, helpful things foster parents or other supportive adults have done for them.

- Have them read Ashley's and Teresa's stories and look for instances of how good foster parenting helped the writers. Teresa's new foster dad helped her with her homework and she went from getting D's to being "one of the top students" (p. 13). Ashley's foster mom is supportive and inclusive but she sets limits, so Ashley feels part of a family (p. 20). Have your students circle the effects of good foster parenting in the two stories. Then have them return to their own lists and add how they've seen the benefits of support from caring adults—family members, foster parents, teachers, staff, etc.—in their own lives.