

Providing Relationship Education to Foster Care Youth

More than a quarter of a million children enter foster care each year in the United States. Many of these children have witnessed or experienced domestic violence. Children exposed to unhealthy relationships often suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, passivity or withdrawal, and aggressive behavior. This experience dramatically increases their risk of getting involved in unhealthy relationships themselves. Foster care youth are also at higher risk of teenage pregnancy and prostitution. The following tips will aid relationship educators and practitioners in helping youth in foster care build the skills to develop and maintain healthy romantic relationships.

Connect with professionals already working with youth. Youth in foster care regularly interact with a wide variety of youth workers, counselors, caseworkers, and volunteers. These service providers are a valuable resource to marriage and relationship education (MRE) practitioners seeking to work with foster care youth. Before conducting a relationship education course, talk to professionals who work with the youth who will be in your workshop. Ask for advice on how to connect with youth, how best to prepare, and if there are any red flags or topic areas to avoid. Have a protocol in place and know whom to follow up with if a young person has an emotional crisis during your session. Be clear about mandatory reporting requirements and other support available to any young people who disclose abuse while participating in your session. If working with youth who are not familiar with you, recruit a partner to help with facilitation of your learning sessions. This partner may be a



teacher, a caseworker, or another adult the youth already know and trust.

Encourage Communication. Youth often want to discuss relationships with an adult in their life, but do not feel comfortable or know to whom they should speak. This is why it is so important for practitioners to raise the topic of healthy relationships and to create an open and non-judgmental line of communication. Keep in mind that youth tend to test adults and may act as though they are extremely opposed to talking about relationships. Young people might use vulgar or inappropriate language when asked about romantic relationships; this may be all they know and what they have been taught. Be patient and work together with youth to come up with ways to communicate appropriately and effectively.

Help youth envision what a healthy relationship looks like. When a child does not have parents or role models to demonstrate what a healthy relationship is, he or she often does not know what positive things to expect or search for in a

relationship. It may take these children a long time to identify their own vision of a healthy relationship. Plan to support and assist these youth in developing practical aspects of this vision over time. Ask the youth what is important to them and create opportunities to bring up concepts such as support, respect, honesty, loyalty, etc. in regular conversation. Keep in mind that young people do not always concretely understand concepts like respect or support—or how to incorporate these elements into their lives. Take time to break down what these words truly mean. Give examples that a young person can relate to while encouraging youth to come up with their own examples. This is also a good time to help youth establish boundaries and a plan for how to react when pressured by a partner. Be prepared to address how issues like sex, sexual diversity, contraception, drugs, and alcohol affect relationship choices.

Identify the warning signs of a dangerous relationship. It is very important for vulnerable youth to know the warning signs of a dangerous relationship. Youth in foster care are especially susceptible to emotional, sexual, and physical abuse. These youth deserve access to the same information that most children receive from caring and protective parents. With less parental involvement, foster children often end up hanging out in environments that can lead to poor decision-making and risky behaviors. Youth in foster care have a higher rate of becoming pregnant, incarcerated, involved in prostitution, or addicted to drugs and alcohol. This can also influence who they meet and become involved with. Helping youth in foster care identify relationship warning signs empowers them by providing the information they need to make healthy decisions.

The following questions can help a foster care youth make decisions about his or her romantic partner:

-Does he or she have a history of getting into trouble, fighting, or destroying property?

-Does he or she hit, push, choke, restrain, kick, or physically intimidate you?

-Does he or she use drugs or alcohol and/or pressure you to take them?

-Does he or she blame you for how he or she treats you or for anything bad that happens?

-Is he or she always angry at someone or something?

-Does he or she try to isolate you and control who you see or where you go?

-Does he or she force you to be sexual when you do not want to be?

-Does he or she tell you how to dress or act?

-Has he or she ever threatened to kill himself or herself if you break up?

-Has he or she told you to shut up or made you feel bad about yourself in any way?

If young people respond “yes” to any of these questions, a referral to a local Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) provider for an assessment might be appropriate. If you establish good rapport with the youth, they are more likely to report what is happening in their relationships. Offer support and talk them through possible ways to end the relationship in a healthy manner or to involve parents or other supports as necessary.

Become Culturally Competent and LGBTQ Aware. Vulnerable youth come from all cultures

and backgrounds. When working with young people, it is important to value their cultural identity and understand how that diversity may affect your work. Values and norms, especially about romantic relationships, vary widely across cultures. Do not assume that your values—or even the mainstream youth culture and values—are the norm for the young people with whom you work. Ask youth about their culture values, and how those norms impact the decisions they make and the type of relationship they aspire to have. These responses might be very different from what you expect. Help youth incorporate their values and beliefs into their romantic relationships. Discuss with youth the importance of respecting their culture and their partner's culture. Ensure that the resources and materials you use are culturally competent.

Although there are no reliable statistics, providers and other individuals who work in child welfare and juvenile justice systems consistently report that LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, and questioning) youth are disproportionately represented among youth in foster care. This means those advocating for healthy relationships among youth in foster care must educate themselves on how to best support LGBTQ youth. Practitioners can create a safe environment for all youth to discuss their sexuality and ensure a climate of open communication where youth can explore how these core relationship skills matter, regardless of one's sexual identity. When using examples in training sessions or discussions, be sure the examples used are gender inclusive and apply to lesbian, gay, and inter-racial couples.

Do not force young people to self-disclose their sexual identity; remember many vulnerable young people have been bullied or abused because of their perceived sexual orientation. These youth

may also come from communities or families where they may fear this disclosure could result in becoming victims of such abuse. At the same time, make sure that sexual diversity is respected in your sessions and allow the space for youth to discuss how their sexual orientation and gender identity affect relationships.

Incorporate Relationship Education in Other Developmental Work.

Youth in foster care often become overwhelmed with workers, therapists, courses, meetings, and appointments. When possible, try to incorporate relationship education into other aspects of the young person's life. Some foster care agencies give journey books or life books to children when they enter care; these are used to keep memories, photos, and life experiences in one portable resource. These books are the perfect place for young people to keep their healthy relationship plans.

When working with youth in foster care, it is important for both foster parents and practitioners to develop an open line of communication about the importance of healthy relationships. Some important ways to help young people learn about healthy relationships are to incorporate the topic in daily interactions, role model, and have ongoing conversations and learning activities.

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