



## **Ensuring Healthy Connections for Young People in Foster Care through Peer Mentoring**

*National Foster Youth Advisory Council*

Members of the National Foster Youth Advisory Council (NFYAC) believe that every young person in the foster care system should have a peer mentor to ensure that they have support and guidance while they are in foster care system as well as during the time that they are preparing to age out. A peer mentoring relationship is a supportive relationship with someone who shares the experience of an out of home placement.

We believe that all young people in foster care need:

- A compassionate, dedicated supportive peer connection in their lives;
- Access to opportunities and resources that allow them to build a healthy support network;
- To work in partnership with their casemanager to develop an effective transition plan that includes a permanent connection with a mentor;
- Access to services and financial supports to promote healthy connections; and
- A safe, stable place to call home.

Every young person in the foster care system is impacted by the loss of relationships and connections, which are essential in promoting the health and positive development of a young person. A lack of supports and social networks place young people in the foster care system at a further disadvantage than their peers. It has been found that youth in mentoring programs are likely to have fewer absences from school, better attitudes towards school, fewer incidents of violence, less drug and alcohol use, more positive social attitudes, and improved relationships and improved relationships with their parents (Jekielek, M.A., Moore, K.A., & Hair, E.C., 2002). In fact, peer mentoring programs have demonstrated a decrease in school dropout rates, provided much-needed role-modeling, and made other meaningful contributions to the life of a young person (Hedin, D., 1987).

Foster care “alumni” and young people preparing to successfully transition out of the foster care system understand the need for healthy connections and significant role models while growing up in foster care. Only they can truly understand the experience of being removed from their birth parents and

siblings, living in multiple placements, and the constant feelings of isolation, instability, and loss. Thousands of young people transition out of the foster care system without solid connections and familial supports, making it challenging, at best, to build successful lives. In an effort to create a healthy support network, NFYAC members believe it is critical that current and former foster youth connect with a peer who can recognize their strengths, talents and potential while giving them an “experienced” helping hand into their future.

In June 2005, the Child Welfare League of America along with FosterClub received a grant to launch a project in which former foster youth mentor children and youth currently in the foster care system. In an effort to infuse the voice of foster youth into this project, members of the National Foster Youth Advisory Council’s October 2005 meeting focused on addressing the strengths and challenges that current and former foster youth face with regard to permanent and supportive connections with their peers. NFYAC members were asked to define “peer mentoring” for themselves, share some of their mentoring experiences and provide recommendations for ensuring healthy peer connections for current and former foster youth.

### **NFYAC’s Top Ten Recommendations for Ensuring Healthy Connections for Young People in Foster Care through Peer Mentoring**

#### **Help me find my way**

Young people in the foster care system all need a permanent connection in their lives. All Council members expressed wanting someone, a life long connection to help him or her “find their way.” Several NFYAC members indicated that age isn’t really a factor in connecting with a mentor instead, it is more about the “bond and common experience.” According to NFYAC members, the most important part of the relationship is understanding and sharing the experiences of out-of-home care. Although Council members see value in all types of mentoring relationships, most NFYAC members indicated an interest in wanting a mentor who has traveled the same road and understands “what it is like to be in foster care.” A mentoring relationship with a peer can help another foster youth learn from the other person’s mistakes and prevent them from facing the same obstacles. *A peer mentor can help another young person to find their way.*

#### **Be willing to commit and just spend time with me**

Many times, young people find that mentors feel pressure to spent time together with a specific purpose in mind. Almost all of the Council members expressed this concern. What many of the Council members indicated was that a mentor doesn’t always have to do “something” with them – sometimes they can just hang out and do nothing together - that time is just as significant. One Council member, with personal and professional experience in the mentoring field, stressed that “if you don’t have the time or level of commitment needed to be a mentor – don’t do it.” In fact, a few Council members shared

that it often causes more damage to a young person when someone backs out of a mentoring relationship than to never have had one at all. *A peer mentor can make an impact in another foster youth's life through a genuine level of commitment and time.*

### **Lead by example**

Current and former foster youth need a role model in their lives to guide them down the right path by helping them to make the right decisions. One NFYAC member who is also a peer mentor indicated that she feels the responsibility to "lead by example." She said that being a mentor to someone else encourages her to be a better person because she takes her responsibility to another foster youth very seriously. NFYAC members also stressed the fact that peer mentoring has challenges which include drawing clear boundaries. "You can't party with your mentee," says one Council member. However, many Council members also expressed the gratification that they got when helping other foster youth to a better place in their lives. *A peer mentor can positively influence another young person by being a good role model.*

### **Don't stereotype me**

Many foster youth feel like there is a stigma attached to being in foster care. All Council members had strong feelings about not being stereotyped just because they were part of the system. Many times youth feel that others assume that they are going to act a certain way or do certain things because of their background. Unfortunately, this also happens in mentoring relationships. Each Council member expressed the desire to have someone in their lives who will not judge them based on their past or even their present lives. *A peer mentoring relationship should be entered without judgments.*

### **Support me when I need it**

Foster youth face many struggles while in the system. Many times, they aren't looking for answers or solutions but support from those around them. One NFYAC member indicated that although many of the experiences that are shared with a peer mentor are similar, they are not the same. This Council member eloquently shared a quote that described this, "We might walk the same path, but not in the same shoes." Another Council member indicates that her mentor never said, "I promise" or "I understand." Instead, she listened, supported her and tried to find her resources to help her through her problems. "Sometimes" Council members say, "you have to learn from your own mistakes." Another Council member shares that often supporting a peer is just being there for those "special days, birthdays or anniversaries" such as your parent's birthday or the anniversary date of the day you came into care. These are just a few of the days when you need someone to lean on. *A peer mentor can be there to support another foster youth when they just need someone.*

### **Be my confidant**

Youth in foster care, like their peers need someone to trust and build a relationship with. However, it is also important that peer mentors and mentees understand appropriate boundaries around confidentiality. One NFYAC member explained that all mentors and mentees need to understand the rules around confidentiality. She explained that as a mentor she is under obligation to report anything that might lead her to think that her mentee is being hurt by someone else, hurting someone else or in danger of hurting herself. This often causes challenges but also opens up the lines of communication and role clarification. *A peer mentoring relationship needs to build on trust, boundaries and confidentiality.*

### **Be my advocate and help me to learn how to advocate for myself**

Foster youth want someone who will be on their side and stand up for them. Often foster youth feel that no one is there to advocate for them however, a peer mentoring relationship can provide a young person with the opportunity to experience someone supporting them. Additionally, this type of mentoring relationship can also teach young people how to advocate for themselves. Young people learn to value their own voice when they feel someone else respects their views and opinions. One NFYAC member indicated that he was able to teach another youth how to handle himself and ask the “right” questions in certain situations based on his own experiences in the system. *A peer mentoring relationship can help to develop and support advocacy skills.*

### **Teach me to how to mentor others in the future**

Foster youth that have had successful, healthy mentoring relationships often move on to successfully mentor others. NFYAC members indicated that training in areas such as relationship building, crisis intervention and confidentiality is helpful in successfully learning to mentor others. Being a good role model and a supportive person in another person’s life can impact how one mentors someone else. *A healthy, peer mentoring relationship can lead to other successful mentoring relationships.*

### **Give me access to different mentoring resources**

Current and former foster youth are involved in various activities. Many times, these circumstances lead to seeking out different and more creative ways of maintaining contact with peers and mentors in their lives. Although many NFYAC members find value in a face-to-face relationship with a peer mentor, some Council members indicated that other types of mentoring such as e-mentoring have also been helpful to them. One Council member shared that she had a mentoring relationship via e-mail for a period of time that she found very helpful. She would spent time on email, at any time of the day – she said it was like a “journal or a diary.” Other Council members said that having access to a mentor face to face and via email would be the best fit for them. Some Council members expressed an interest in mentors of different genders. According to one Council member, there are some things that she can share

with her female mentor and other things that she discusses with her male mentor. *A peer mentoring relationship can develop in different ways to best fit the needs of the young people involved.*

**Educate others about the importance of mentoring**

Not everyone understands the impact that mentoring has on youth in foster care. When asked how the Council can promote peer mentoring in their own communities, their responses included: by educating others about the importance of mentoring by sharing their stories and by supporting legislation that supports mentoring programs. Sometimes all it takes is sharing your story with one person to make a huge impact on another young person's life. *A peer mentor can help to educate others about mentoring by sharing their own mentoring story.*