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This manual is dedicated to youth in & from care everywhere
and to the “original 7” of the NYICN who had the dream that started it all
and to John Meston for believing in them!

Thank you for your passion.

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Introduction

Have you ever felt like you didn't have a voice, or a say in your life? Have you ever had a really good idea for a project or a group that would help you and other youth in care, but didn't know how or where to start? Have you ever thought you couldn't do something, just because of your age, where you live, or what your file says about you?

There are many of us who have felt the same way. In fact, there are thousands of youth in care who have answered "Yes!" to the above questions. You should know that it doesn't have to be that way. You CAN have control over your life and the decisions that affect you directly.

That's why we've created this manual. The information in this manual can help you get there. It can help youth in care across Canada help themselves. How? Well, if you take a quick peek at the Table of Contents, you will see that we have added everything, plus the kitchen sink to better help you no matter where your network is at in it's development.

All of the information you will read here was written by your peers. Some are still in care and have only just started creating a local group themselves. Others are no longer directly involved with their local network as they have aged out (over 25) but have offered their experiences to help you avoid making some of their mistakes.

The best thing about this manual is that all of the information is tried, tested and true. That doesn't mean that you have to follow it word for word, as you may know of ways that will work better for you and your group.

Worksheets, templates and contact lists are in the manual and are also on disk to make updating easy and as an added bonus, we've thrown in a "Local Development Worker's Survival Guide" which covers all of the stuff that's sure to come up in your first 6 months on the job.

To give you a better sense of what this thing called "networking" is, we've added the words of one youth from care who explains what it all means to her...

Reflections on Networking

A month after my 21st birthday (when I "graduated" from care), my social worker called to ask if I'd be interested in going to a church hall for a meeting.

"What kind of meeting?" I asked.

"A meeting for youth in care," replied my social worker.

"Why?"

"Well, just to get together, eat some free pizza and talk."

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Because other youth could really benefit from what you might have to share, Gretchen."

"But you know how hard I've worked to move past all that, and besides, I don't want to start hanging out with people like that..."

My heart tightens to think that for my very first opportunity to meet my family, I wasn't interested. That may sound strange to say that a group of youth were *unmet* family, but I *truly* believe that. Maybe they wouldn't be people who I would hang out with normally, but we don't all get along with our siblings now do we? Family loves each other unconditionally, regardless of our behaviour, or what our interests are, or who our friends are...no matter what...that's what unconditional means. I grew to develop some of the closest relationships I've ever had in my life, and through sharing my pain and insecurity with people I trust, I learned to accept my past as something to learn from and not feel shame for.

If we're ever going to find peace and happiness and be able to share love with a trusting heart, we have to learn how to forgive, to believe in ourselves, and to believe in our siblings. We have to work very hard to find our identity outside of our negative experiences, but still learn from those experiences. We have to strip ourselves of the shame we feel for the stigma that society places on us, as if children could ever be blamed for being mistreated. Yet, we also have to accept responsibility that we sometimes hold ourselves back. Sometimes we are our own worst enemy because we tend to believe that we are to blame, that something is wrong with us as individuals that created this situation. (There's a storm cloud following me around...anyone ever think that?)

There is no storm cloud following us around, singling us out to feel bad. Our lives are not mapped out for us before we are born with no hope of true happiness or satisfaction. We make our own path, our own joy. Or we can continue making ourselves miserable the way others have. It's our choice. It's our life. And we only get one, last time I counted.

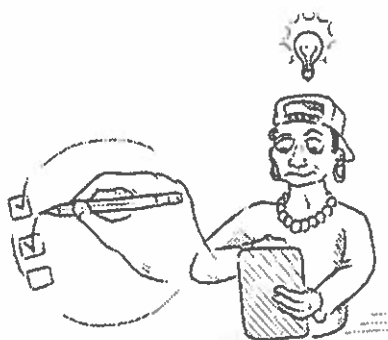
Youth in care networks are an opportunity. There is no mathematical equation, no rigid definition of a youth in care network. It is a group of individuals, with individual thoughts and ideas, in one area of a large country. Nor is there any magic pixie dust that makes youth in care networks start up, be successful, or be sustainable. That's up to you. The

NYICN can help, but you need youth involvement and interest and the support of people within Child Welfare and/or other members of the community.

We would like to welcome you to join our family, to let you know that we want you to be happy, that we believe in you and that you can share unconditional love without doubt or mistrust. Best of luck in all you do, I remain

Your sister and friend,
gretchen, prez, NYICN





The How-To's

SO YOU WANNA START A NETWORK

Be prepared for a roller coaster ride of fun, work, great experiences and even a little frustration now and then. There is a lot involved when starting a network, so in this chapter we give you some tips on the basics – things like finding the youth (for more detailed tips on finding youth, refer to Real Youth Involvement), deciding on a place to meet and planning your first meeting.

But first, we wanted to share a letter with you that was written by a youth in care who started a network in Antigonish, Nova Scotia...

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS:

- Starting A Network
- A Place For Your Group To Meet
- Office Equipment
- Advertising
- Food
- Transportation
- Getting Creative – Do Your Own Fundraising
- Your First Meeting
- Welcoming Your Peers
- Icebreakers
- Workshops
- Evaluation
- Wrap-Up
- Debriefing

WHAT'S ON THE DISK?

- Sample Evaluation Of Meeting Form

In the summer of 1998, I attended a conference* in Sydney, Nova Scotia for youth in/from care aged 16–24. I must say that it was one of the best experiences of my life. I felt a closeness and a sense of belonging that I had never experienced before. It was that time in my life when I realized that I wanted to work with other youth in care and try to give them that same feeling. It took a while, but in February 1999, I decided that it was time to try to start up a local group for youth in and from care. I had a lot of help and it was surprisingly easy, but don't get me wrong – it takes A LOT of work and there may be hardships when first getting your group off the ground.

The first step is to find a community place to hold it (preferably not a social service office because some youth may find this an uncomfortable setting, especially seeing as they may be bringing up problems that they have with the system at these meetings). Try to find a place that will let you have bi-weekly meetings for free.

Second, you should have snacks available at the meetings for the youth. I got food sponsored from McDonald's and usually places like fast food restaurants or grocery stores will be willing to sponsor, seeing as it gives them good publicity.

Most important is the youth who come to the meetings and become this group. For your group to be successful you need to involve as many youth as possible. To get youth involved you can do many things: get a list of people in/from care from social services, then invite these people to the first meeting. You can also advertise through newspapers, posters and social services.

These are the basic steps to starting up a group for youth in care. The important thing to remember is to never give up and remember that if you can make a difference in just one person's life, then it is all worth it. The feeling you get from helping just one person is so rewarding that you will be happy that you didn't give up.

Tara Linn –
The Antigonish, Nova Scotia Youth In Care Network

*The Network Buffet Conference – coordinated by the NYICN

After you have decided to start a network (congratulations by the way), there are a few things that you will need.

A PLACE FOR YOUR GROUP TO MEET

There are over 50 networks across Canada. Some are very developed and have their own office space, equipment, supplies and annual budget. But they didn't start out that way. When most networks are starting out, they meet in places like local community centers or other agencies. Others decide it would be best to meet at the local Children's Aid Society or Social Services office. You could even consider meeting at a foster parent's home, or at a member's apartment... privacy is the key.

A good way to decide where you will meet is to brainstorm as a group. There are some important things to keep in mind when choosing the location:

The cost

Try to get a meeting space that is free. Most new networks do not have a lot of money (in some cases, no money). Usually, other non-profits will lend out some of their space free of charge. (See Fundraising for more info.)

Will group members feel comfortable there?

Some youth will not feel comfortable at the Children's Aid, or at a Child Welfare or Social Services office. It can be difficult for some of us to talk about being in care of an agency when the adults who run that agency are sitting in the room with us. The members of your group should not have to worry that anything they say will be held against them or put into their file – otherwise, what's the point?

You may also want to think about the layout of the space. Meeting in a room with comfortable chairs and/or couches will beat out an impersonal board room with long tables, hard chairs and fluorescent lighting any day.

Is the space wheelchair accessible?

Youth with special needs may be attending your meeting. Make sure you always take this into consideration.

Consider things like ramps, elevators (or having your meeting on the first floor), bathrooms with wheelchair access, someone who can guide a seeing-impaired youth, or having someone who can sign for hearing-impaired youth.

Smoking

This is a big one. Most buildings are non-smoking, so if you have smokers in your group (chances are you will), look for a space somewhere close to the building where your members can take smoke breaks during the meeting. This will also ensure that those who don't smoke, don't choke.

Make sure that there is a bucket or an old coffee can to throw your butts into so the agency grounds aren't littered. AND, try not to plan your meeting around smoking times. As a group, you can agree on designated times for breaks – sticking to these scheduled breaks will help you get the work done.



Children

Many youth in and from care have babies and children, but not all network members will feel comfortable having children at their meetings. It is important to remember that many youth don't have money to hire baby-sitters nor do they know of reliable people who can look after their children for free. Should this stop them from participating in meetings? It doesn't have to.

Some ideas...

- Is it safe for small children to be at the meeting?
- Will small children disrupt the meeting?
- Does anyone have a younger brother or sister who might come along to entertain and take care of the children?
- Could group members alternate so that there is always one group member who will watch them?
- Could an adult support person offer 1–2 hours to take care of small children while the parents meet?
- Could members with children host the meeting at their home?

Adults

Some agencies will insist that there be an adult in the building while you meet, usually because it is after agency hours. Before giving the thumbs up, make sure that all of your group members are comfortable with this.

If there is no way around this, arrange it so that your group can choose the adults that you are most comfortable with. Make it clear that you don't need that adult in the room with you but will rely on them for support if your group decides they need it. For example, if the topic of conversation becomes upsetting or there is something going on in a member's personal life that an adult support person may be qualified to help with, the group may decide to invite the adult in. In other words, the adult would join your group when invited by the group.

REMEMBER

This is YOUR group and it should be run on YOUR terms. If there are certain things your group wants and needs but aren't getting from a particular agency you may want to try to find another place to meet. (Refer to Adult Support for more info.)

OFFICE EQUIPMENT

When organizing your first meeting and group activities, you will definitely need the use of basic office equipment. This can become very expensive.

You'll definately need a telephone to contact youth about things like meeting times or events, contacting adults, confirming that meeting space is available, and to have some way for people to contact you. Some of these calls will be long distance, especially for those of us living in rural areas. Ask your local agency or community center if you can use their telephone for these purposes.

ADVERTISING

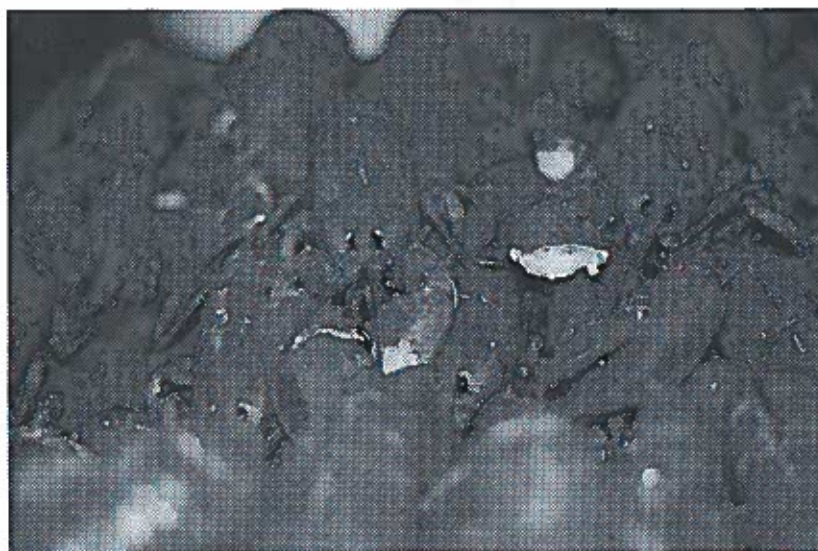
Making posters, pamphlets or letters to advertise your group means you will need paper and a photocopier, not to mention the postage and envelopes to mail this information out. (For more information, refer to Projects.) For this, ask the agency to send out your info with their mail-outs. If they won't be doing one for a while, ask if they could donate the paper, photocopier and postage. Chances are the agency will say yes, but if it's a matter of a tight budget, you may want to offer a few hours of your time to help around the agency as payment for use of their equipment.

FOOD

A good thing to have at the meeting is FOOD because:

- it's good incentive for youth to come out
- some of your members may not have time to eat before the meeting as they might be coming straight from work or school.

But like everything else, food costs money. Your group could try to get some donations from a food chain like McDonald's, or Tim Horton's, or a grocery store or pizza place. You could also ask your agency if they could provide money for food for meetings. And you could always ask that some of your members bring something – like a potluck dinner.



TRANSPORTATION

Most of your group members will require some form of transportation to and from the meetings. In bigger cities, public transportation may be very convenient, but what if your members don't have money to spend on extra trips? Or what if your network is in a rural area and doesn't have public bus routes? Here are some ideas:

- Ask foster parents or social workers to drive their youth to and from meetings, or ask one or two adults to volunteer a few hours to drive youth to and from the meeting.
- Hold your meetings on the same nights that foster parents or social workers meet at the agency or local Foster Family Association – that way youth can hitch a ride to and from the meeting or event.
- Ask the agency to provide bus fare for all members.
- Ask the agency for "taxi chits". These are like "IOUs that the agency and local taxi companies use to cover cab fare when passengers don't have the cash to pay. It is a small form that the passenger gives to the driver who then fills out the amount and the passenger verifies this by signing it. The taxi or cab company cashes this in with the agency at a later date.

GETTING CREATIVE – DO YOUR OWN FUNDRAISING

You can also raise your own money for some of these costs (see Fundraising for more information). You can hold raffles, car washes, dances, plays or even baseball games. These are also great ways to get youth involved in your network.

Some networks make lunches for workers at the agency and sell them for profit. You may need a start-up fund to purchase supplies, but you could make an arrangement with the agency to borrow the start-up funds, with a promise to give it back after you have raised your money. Make flyers that advertise that your network will be at the agency on a specific date and include a menu. Try to keep your costs reasonable so that they will want to buy from you instead of the local restaurant or greasy spoon. Add a number to the flyer where they can call to place their orders. Ask the agency for permission before posting your flyers, and ask for a designated spot to set up your lunch stand.

You could ask a foster parent for the use of their kitchen to make the lunches. They may even be willing to transport you to the agency to sell your goods. Show up at the agency early and set up a table or booth close to the building where you are visible. Come lunch time, they'll be lining up.

The money you raise could cover some of the transportation and food costs of your meeting – and you could even be starting a small business that will help your group quickly become independent!

Here's a sample advertising flyer:

HUNGRY?

STOP PAYING FOR OVERPRICED, MEDIOCRE MEALS THAT JUST DON'T SATISFY!

Join us on April 1st (this is no joke)
in the front courtyard of Children's Aid for...

• LE MENU •

Cold Sandwiches (chicken, ham, turkey, cheese and vegetarian) \$2.50 each

Soup (chicken and veggie) \$1.50 (it's a honkin' big bowl)
made fresh for you, straight from a foster parent's kitchen

Caesar or Garden Salad \$1.00 (small) \$2.00 (large)

Soft drinks, lemonade, or O.J. 75 cents

Nanaimo bars, brownies, cookies or fresh fruit 75 cents each

OR

get the WHOLE enchilada for just \$6.50 !!!

So get yourself a 'LOVIN' SPOONFUL'*
and have lunch with us this April 1.

All funds raised go to the
(name of your network here)

*(Lovin' Spoonful is a really old, but really cool
band – trust us, they'll get it.)



youth in care
networks are
developing all
over the world
so that we can
have control
over our lives!



YOUR FIRST MEETING

So now you've got the space, the food, the adult support, the transportation and of course, the youth. Now what? Your meeting should be about more than just eating pizza. You'll want to have some kind of theme during your meeting. Pick a topic to discuss like rights, independent living, or the pros and cons of living in foster care or group homes. But you may not want to just jump into that as soon as youth set foot in the door. The following are some ideas that networks have put into action.

WELCOMING YOUR PEERS

Remember that just because you want to start a network, doesn't mean that other youth will be interested immediately. In fact, some of the youth who come to the first meeting won't come back. Maybe they aren't ready to be so open about being in care or they feel that they were forced to go against their will. These are good things to find out from the start.

You can do this by having a "check-in" session. Basically, as the facilitator it is your job to help your peers feel welcome and comfortable with their surroundings (especially if the only meeting place you could find was at social services). Explain to the group the purpose of the meeting and what you are trying to do. You don't need to give an hour-long speech here – try to keep it brief so others have time to speak.

After you have introduced yourself and the purpose of this meeting, ask for a volunteer to tell the group who they are and why they are there. This will give you a good sense of whether or not they were asked or told to attend and why. There may be more than one group member who believes that they had no say in being there. This could open up a whole topic of conversation. For example, you could ask:

"Do the rest of you feel that adults are always telling us what to do and how to do it?"

OR,

"Does anyone here feel that they have control over their lives?"

Or something along those lines. This is also a good opportunity to let them know that they aren't alone in that feeling and that because of those types of concerns, youth in care networks are developing all over the world so that we can have control over our lives!

ICE BREAKERS

Your first meeting is guaranteed to be at least a little bit uncomfortable for some youth – maybe even for you if this is your first time facilitating a meeting. You'll have an easier time if you open up the group with a 'getting to know you' introduction, something that's fun and everyone can participate in.

Check out the five examples below:



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1. WORD ASSOCIATION from *More Than A Shot In The Dark...* written by the
Network Group of the Pape Adolescent Resource Center

Purpose: To assist members of the group to get to know each other and be comfortable with each other. The game can be used to introduce discussions about serious topics.

Number of participants: At least four.

Description: One person starts by saying a word e.g., "Dog". The next person immediately says the first thing that comes to their mind, for example, "Cat"...and so on. Notice how the subject has changed by the end of the circle. Try using themes for people's responses. For example, instruct the group to use words that relate to being in care.

Discussion Questions:

Were you surprised by your immediate response?

What do you think about the response you gave?

Did you really say the first thing that came to mind? If not, why not?

2. MIMIC Created by Yvonne Andrews

Purpose: To illustrate how our perceptions of things can vary and how easily we can be influenced by others.

Number of Participants: This game needs 3 or more people. Your entire group can participate in this one.

Materials: Imagination.

Description: The facilitator will ask participants to stand in a straight line, facing away from him or her. The facilitator then asks the first person in line to turn around and face her. The facilitator then "acts out" the motions of 'washing an elephant' or 'washing a car', without telling the participant what he/she is doing. After observing this, the participant is then asked to 'whisper' to the facilitator what they were doing. Then, without knowing whether they were right or wrong, the participant copies this for the next person in line.

The group continues doing this until everyone has had a chance. Then the facilitator will act it out as they did for the first participant, to show how much the actions changed from person to person.

Discussion Questions: How did you feel waiting in line for your turn?

How did it feel to not know what was happening behind your back?

What did you think you were supposed to be acting out? (chances are, everyone will have a different response).

3. ARM FOLDING EXERCISE from *More Than A Shot In The Dark...* written
by the Network Group of the Pape Adolescent Resource Center

Purpose: To help group members reflect on personal change.

Description: Ask the group to fold their arms in front of them. Tell them that they should not glance down to identify which arm rests on top of the other.

Then ask them to quickly unfold their arms and re-fold them the other way (i.e., if the left arm was on top, it should now be underneath the right arm.)

Discussion Questions:

Why did you find this awkward? (It was a change from years of old habits)

How does it feel in this new position? (Uncomfortable?)

If even this slight physical change may have built some resistance, what implications does this have for more substantial physical and intellectual change?

What things change in the life of a youth in care?

4. DUCK-DUCK-GOOSE *source unknown – but a great big thanks to all Kindergarten teachers who taught it.*

Remember this one from way back in the day? It may seem juvenile, but can be totally hilarious – especially with a big group or when adults are present. To refresh your memories, it goes a little something like this...

Purpose: To have fun and laugh a lot.

Description: Ask the group to sit in a circle, cross legged. Ask for a volunteer to start the game by walking around the outside of the circle and as they walk tap each person on the head while saying the word 'duck' until they choose some poor soul in the group to be the "goose!". As soon as the "goose" is tapped, both participants must run around the circle in opposite directions until one of them makes it back to the empty spot in the circle first. Whoever is left standing must repeat the above steps, and so on.

Discussion Questions:

Did you have fun?

Is anyone injured?

Water?

5. POWER & SUPPORT *Created By Yvonne Andrews*

Purpose: To encourage team work, respect, concentration and youth empowerment.

Number of Participants: You will need at least 3 people for this game.

Description: This one will take a little more concentration and team work.

Break up into teams of 3's or 4's, depending on how many are in your group. Now ask each of the groups to think about what the words "power" and "support" means to them. As a team, ask them to act out the meanings of those words for the entire group. Give each team approximately 15 minutes to come up with some ideas and no more than 3 minutes to present.

Discussion topics:

How did you feel when you were working in a team?

Do you feel that you were heard?

Who became the leader in your team?

Would you have done it differently and how?

Was there anything in particular that stood out for you when the teams were acting out their ideas?

There are loads of ice breakers and warm up games that you can use when starting your meeting or event. You might consider asking the group if they know of any that they would like to share. Why would you want to do this?

- It encourages youth to take ownership over the group.
- It will help identify some leaders in your group.
- It can boost confidence.

Remember that we don't have to take everything seriously and that some fun is necessary and always welcome!



WORKSHOPS

Things like workshops, guest speakers and discussion topics are good things to have prepared. So how will you come up with some ideas?

Think about the things that you would like more information on or some skills that you have learned that you could offer to your peers. Some common youth in care issues are...

- Current Issues for Youth In/From Care
- Rights, Advocacy and Complaint Procedures
- Preparation for Independence and Life Skills
- Anger Management/Conflict Resolution
- Leadership Skills
- Public Speaking/Communication
- How to Get a Job
- Local Projects For and By Youth in Care Across the Country.

This can be your initial list but don't write it in stone. Present this list at the first meeting and ask your peers to add to it. You might want to first concentrate on the "current issues for youth in care" piece. Together you can draft a list of the most pressing issues or areas of concern for youth in care today. After you have come up with your list try recording it all on flip chart paper and posting it in a spot that is visible during the whole meeting – ask the group to come up with some suggestions on how youth can change some of these things for themselves (refer to Projects).

Whatever your group ends up talking about, remember that it should be focused on their area of interest.

EVALUATION

The following is taken from the YouthSpeak in Your Community manual developed in Vancouver, British Columbia by Patricia Kotovich and Angie Kirby.

WHY EVALUATE?

Asking participants to evaluate the first meeting, event or workshop is a great learning experience for the organizers. It's an opportunity to get feedback about what worked and to get suggestions about how to do it better the next time. This will make your group stronger and allow for others to be a part of organizing things in the future. Try not to overload youth with too many questions at one time.

EVALUATION OPTIONS

① EVALUATION FORM

- Hand out questionnaires (sample form below and on disk) to the group
- Collect questionnaires before participants leave
- Ask participants NOT to write their name on the questionnaire

The *name of your network or event here* **Evaluation Form**

This evaluation form is confidential and anonymous.

How old are you? ____ Are you male or female? ____

What do you think of...? (please check one of the following)

The welcoming
Loved it__ Liked it__ It was okay__ Didn't like it __ It sucked__

Ice breakers
Loved it__ Liked it__ It was okay__ Didn't like it __ It sucked__

The workshop (if you had one)
Loved it__ Liked it__ It was okay__ Didn't like it __ It sucked__

The guest speaker (if you had one)
Loved it__ Liked it__ It was okay__ Didn't like it __ It sucked__

The wrap up activity
Loved it__ Liked it__ It was okay__ Didn't like it __ It sucked__

The food
Loved it__ Liked it__ It was okay__ Didn't like it __ It sucked__

Any other comments you like to add? (i.e., what you would like to see next time, anything we should change? Would you like to come to another meeting?)

② HEAD, HEART, FEET

Put up a poster – sized picture of a human figure (make sure that the head, heart and feet are included.)

Give each participant 5 sticky notes. Ask participants to write on the these sticky notes the things that they learned or got out of the workshop/event. Then ask the participants to put their sticky notes on the appropriate part of the flip chart figure.

Head – new ideas and information

Heart – gut feelings and responses

Feet – where you'll take this knowledge and use it

③ BEFORE AND AFTER

At the very beginning, ask each participant to write down 3 or more things that they are hoping to learn from the meeting or workshop. At the end of the meeting or workshop, ask them to look at what they wrote and to write down beside each point what they actually learned.

WRAP UP

Now we come to the end of your very first meeting. A few things that you may want to do with the group are:

- A closing "check in" – What did everyone think about the group? Will you come back? When would you like to have the next meeting? etc.
- Hand out things like "Network Sign Up" sheets so that you can get in touch with each other easier (instead of having to go through social workers) and so youth can have access to your newsletter (if you have one) or know about any other network projects.
- Hand out a rights handbook or flyer (you can get these through the Child Advocate's office or Social Services agency), or a list of Rights that you created yourself. Remember to add phone numbers of the Child Advocate or Ombudsmen for them to call if they have questions about their rights or feel that these rights have been violated.
- Hand out a network brochure or business card (if you have either), or give them your contact information (phone number, network mailing address or E-mail address.)

OTHER STUFF...

Make sure that you do not leave the building until you know for certain that all youth have been picked up or are on their way home.

Respect your space by cleaning up afterward. Don't leave any garbage, paper, markers, or anything that wasn't there before you arrived, laying around.

Let the adult support person know that you are leaving so they can lock up.



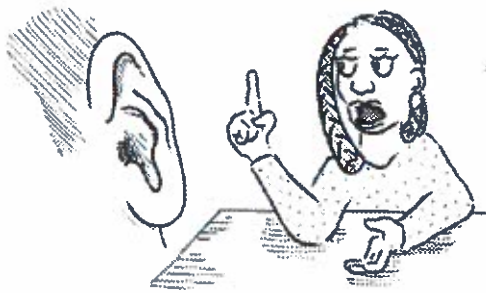
Just
as your peers
deserve the
opportunity to
share and
heal, so
do you!



DEBRIEFING

Talking with the other facilitators (if there were any) or adult support people after the meeting is very important. It's a chance to reflect on the pros and cons, to review the evaluation forms and to get a sense of what was good and what needs to change for the next time.

There may have been some upsetting things said at the meeting so it is **ABSOLUTELY** necessary to take care of yourself (see the Local Development Worker's Survival Guide). Identify a support person, whether this is a peer, an adult support, your foster parent, or someone else you feel comfortable with. Just as your peers deserve the opportunity to share and heal, so do you!



If we are going to create services or programs or do special projects for youth in care, why not ask young people if they want or need these things to happen?



CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS:

- Why Involve Youth?
- How Do I Get Youth To The Table?
- How Do I Keep Youth At The Table?

WHAT'S ON THE DISK?

- Top 10 Reasons Why We Must Involve Youth
- Request For Meeting Youth In Facility Letter

Real Youth Involvement

aka "\$1,000,000 for whoever reads this chapter."

Gotcha! Gotcha, gotcha, gotcha! Flipping through the table of contents you saw this chapter and all of a sudden disclosures and facilitating groups didn't seem as exciting, did they? In this chapter we are going to look at how you will be able to better involve youth in and from care within your Network. You may be 14, 24 or 64 – it doesn't matter. Using creativity and fun we are going to help you bring in the most weighty factor of any Network – THE YOUTH! You can have money, strong adult supports, space to meet and some great ideas...but it is the young people who will be the glue of any Network. Very much like a model car...you can have good parts, expensive paint but without any glue you'll drive yourself nuts with trying to get the car to stick together.

The stories are real. The tips are practiced and true. Having said this, names have been changed to protect those seduced by free pizza, youth conferences, exciting job titles and exotic travel (haven't you ever wanted to visit Red Deer?).

After exciting you with such a blasphemous lie of a title (see, now you can't hold us liable!), I guess we really should be on a first name basis. I'm Pytor and I'll be your guide through this section. I've been involved with Networking for a couple of years, having done "my time" on the board of the National and having worked for the Network in Alberta. While helping to organize a number of projects for the Network including conferences, recreation programs, front end supports for youth, holiday activities and other special events, I have had the opportunity to connect with over 2500 youth during my time as a peer helper. So what does this mean? Well, my experiences don't guarantee success, but it could open some doors for you and your Network...Better to learn from my mistakes if you can, than your own.

We are going to cover three components throughout this chapter that are all equally important. You can master one, maybe even two but without all three you will find it to be a much bigger challenge to have a successful Network. Imagine if you will that it is like a big plate of poutine (my eastern roots are showing!). There are fries, cheese and gravy. Those combined make the gooey mess, everybody loves. Without the cheese, all you're eating is gravy. No gravy, well than it's just fries and cheese. No fries...ugh, that's just wrong. But you get the idea. You need all three to make perfect poutine. Much the same, to have a successful Network you'll need:

- An excellent understanding as to WHY youth must be involved with the Network.
- A process of getting youth involved with both the Network in general and specific projects.
- A way to keep those youth involved.



To better cover these three points we will use the following scenario and characters as a recurring example:

Jon, Paul and Ringo want to start a basketball team in their community for youth in and from care. Jon is 21 and has been out of care for two years and Paul is 19 and has been out of care for the past five months. Ringo owns a small business but has been a foster parent in the community for a number of years. They think that a basketball team will help kids get connected and give them something to do with their evenings as opposed to hanging out at the local corner store.

There you are with several others sitting around a table chatting. You have seen how successful other communities have been developing Networks and the cool projects that they have been involved with. As you talk you realize that the three of you are going to start a Network or work on a Network project in your community. You begin planning, charting out where you want to go with your idea, what needs to be done. Much like our friends Jon, Paul and Ringo you have a great idea and you think that you can help young people living in the system. Lets take a look at this scenario...can the three fellows answer the following questions:

- ① Who's hanging out by the local corner store?
- ② Who isn't involved in community activities?
- ③ Who is currently living in care?
- ④ Who would be playing basketball?
- ⑤ Who might need help organizing a pick up basketball game?

The answer for all five: Young people, right? So if they want to make this happen who should they ask? For the three pointer did you guess it – exactly, young people! Why you ask? Well...

If we are going to create services or programs or do special projects for youth in care, why not ask young people if they want or need these things to happen? They might like soccer, baseball or even lawn bowling. What if youth in Jon's community don't like basketball? The three organize, plan and work towards the first game and low and behold, no youth. Why? Well, had they first asked youth what they wanted they may have found that only a youth lawn bowling league could have pulled them from their post guarding the garbage bin of that corner store.

When developing Network initiatives it is critical to have REAL youth involvement. I am glad that I am typing this, because now I can highlight the word REAL so you have a better understanding of just how important it is.

We have to find out what youth in care want and need, and to do this is to involve them in every step of the process.

Let's pretend that the guys held a focus group and ten youth came out. How is this going to make the process any better? Jon figures that this, in fact is only wasting time...he could be "on the court with some kids by the week-end". From the focus group, though, they find out about this desire to have a lawn bowling club for youth in care. This focus group definitely saved quite a bit of time for the three, as now they know this is what young people want.

The Oxford Dictionary definition of "REAL".

re'al a. actually existing as a thing or occurring in fact; objective, genuine, rightly called so, natural, sincere, not merely apparent or nominal or supposed or pretended or artificial or hypocritical.

The Pytor definition of what "REAL" isn't.

re'al bs. head patting, patronizing, tokenizing, asking just for the sake of asking or asking to make it look like youth are involved.

Oh, but there are other benefits of involving youth, all which answer "why" involving youth is important. The next page is copy ready – post it on your wall, computer or over your bed – anywhere it will remind you that you should be working to involve youth with your process. Remember Jon's comment, "I could be on the court with some kids by the weekend"; had he brought youth

to the table it would have been them who were recruiting, coordinating and developing that recreation program. And do you know what? By having youth still in care plan and work on projects within your Network you are sure to attract an increased number of youth to your events or activities. You know why? Well, youth want to hang out with other youth. Hmm.

TOP TEN REASONS TO INVOLVE YOUTH

1. It keeps the vision of youth helping youth alive within your organization... this is the passion that drives Networks across Canada.
2. It allows youth to identify what their wants and needs are – who better to do that than them?
3. It shows them the respect they deserve, as those youth living in care are the experts on being in care.
4. When young people are involved in the development and implementation of the Network and Network projects it instills ownership. It becomes the youth's passion to drive the project and make it a success!
5. With that sense of ownership comes a sense of pride, increased self-esteem, self-value and self-worth...in a nutshell the warm fuzzies go nuts!
6. It puts the control back into the hands of youth! Not just the name of a book, but a reality. As so many young people have shared, it is adults and others who make the decisions that affect their lives. Their involvement provides them with a chance to reclaim control of their lives.
7. By providing youth in care with an opportunity to become involved in the Network and Network activities we are also providing them the opportunity to build on skills; everything from public speaking, working in a team setting and decision making to using a computer or a fax machine. These are real skills that transfer to other parts of their lives.
8. When young people get a taste of REAL involvement they want more. More often than not, once a youth has had a chance to experience this REAL involvement they will be back, each time building skills and becoming a more valuable asset to your organization.
9. This is an ideal training ground for future full time Networkers. The experience that a 15-year-old gets now will only help them be stronger members when they are 18, 20 and 24.
10. Why the hell not?

(saved on disk)



When
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HOW DO I GET YOUTH TO THE TABLE?

In this section we are going to look at two separate pieces: how to get youth to the table to start with and then how to get them involved in Network activities by taking part in, or planning them. You can host the greatest events but if youth don't buy into what's planned, then you might find yourself in a situation like Paul's: at the basketball court, waiting. And waiting. Alas, no youth showed up for the game. So, check this out...

We should backtrack a bit though – Jon first tried to host a focus group at a local coffee shop. And failed. This group was not having much success. This was when Paul had the greatest idea to date: "Why don't we call other Networks to see what they have done to get youth involved?"

After a ring to the National Youth In Care Network (NYICN) and a few other local networks, Ringo had organized a focus group with the help of Jon and Paul. How did they get these youth to come and give their feedback? They learned through their chats with other Networks that when starting it's important not to assume that youth are going to read a poster and become totally motivated. In fact, in my experiences posters or faxes didn't always work with bringing youth to the table. In fact, looking back at Pytor at 15, would a poster have brought me out? Most likely: no! I would have needed to meet someone or been personally invited or even better someone would have come to me. Because there were times I agreed to go to a meeting about something or another but I didn't always make it. When I was 15, sometimes a date, movie or sleep won out over going to a meeting that I didn't really understand. How about you? The same? I bet you were. In fact, looking at my life now, there are still times where if I don't know what a meeting is about, chances are that something else may restructure my plans and I will miss the meeting.

The boys decided that they would visit programs they knew of in their community that served children and youth and would give a brief presentation on what they wanted to do. From this they would be looking for two things:

- Youth input into their idea
- Youth volunteers to get involved in the planning of their activities

So the boys made a concrete list and with it they identified what programs were out there and who was a strong support to connect within the agency. Now they had their in... The list helped them to plan where they were going, who they were speaking to and how many youth would be there. Wanna peek?

Name of Program	Western Caregivers	Tanner Children's Services	Candlestick Ranch
Type of Program	Foster Care	Residential-Group Care	Independent Living
Number of youth	35	9	23
Adult Contact	Mick Jagger	David Bowie	Janis Joplin
Telephone Number	555-333-3333	555-444-4444	555-444-4444
Visit set for	August 17, 7:00 PM	August 11, 5:00 PM	August 21, 6:00 PM
	8 youth	ALL	IL Group – 11 youth

Topics to Discuss At Focus Group

- This is VOLUNTARY – you don't have to stay if you don't want to, but we would really like your input. (J)
- We are going to try to be brief...quality over quantity! Be honest with us, if these are bad ideas don't be afraid to let us know. (R)
- SURPRISE (J)
- Introductions and reason we are here. (P)
- Introduction of youth. (P)
- Pass out info sheet and go over. (J)
- Get youths feedback, record. (R)
- Thank youth...very much and provide contact info. (JPR)



Word of mouth
is the greatest
advertiser you
will ever have.



Paul phoned and chatted up the workers in the programs and set up times for visits. One tip they had received from another Network was to ensure that they were ON TIME! Often when agencies help set up meetings for outside folks the youth are pretty much forced to be there. So, as it's their time you're running on, get there on time, or even better, early! When they started the meeting they identified several things to the group to help the discussion.

You will notice that they had it all planned out, even who would say what. Your time with the youth is precious; it's their free time after all. So not only make sure that you are on time, but, use your time wisely. As well, there were times when I wasted the youth's time with my own chaos. If I wasn't ready or hadn't planned out my visit and meeting, youth generally weren't as interested, sometimes even gave up and left. We must respect not only their input but also their time that they are generously sharing with you.

Ah, there was also a surprise... when Jon was talking to another Network they had suggested that they bring treats...the first rule in successfully promoting youth involvement...BRING GOODIES! The guys stopped by an ice cream store and picked up bars...clean, small but tasty none the less. Other great ideas of snacks:

- Pizza
- Pop and Chips
- Ice Cream Floats
- Trail Mix
- Cookies/Muffins

Now, after I had been to a program once or twice, it didn't mean that I always have to bring snacks. In fact, you might want to pace out just how often you do this. Yet, when first developing relationships it will certainly help the youth remember you and your ideas. Jon also learned that it doesn't hurt your ego either, because as soon as the ice cream was on the table he was told just how cool he really was!

How else do you get youth involved? Impress one group and more will follow. Word of mouth is the greatest advertiser you will ever have. If one young person is impressed with your presentation and chooses to become involved you have good odds that they may bring a friend the next time they connect with you and your group. Having said that, it works both ways...should you frustrate the youth, word of mouth will also go around – and you won't want to hear those words. Not at all.

Jon also got a tip to inform workers and foster parents about their plans. Why would they need to do that? They are really wanting youth involvement so why involve the adults? Adults involved in the lives of youth in care can be your greatest asset, (next to active youth) when developing and implementing new programs for youth in care. Should adults know what you are planning, first off, it will increase your exposure and secondly, the exposure of your project. As well, these adults are all connected to youth in care – and many youth in care will trust suggestions from their workers and foster parents. If you can, plan a talk at your local child welfare/social worker office. But don't stop there

– there are many adults who are connected to youth in care. Foster parents, teachers, doctors, small business owners...they too have relationships with youth in care. Try to diversify your adult connections! Much like the youth that they serve, professionals also want that personal interaction. Again, posters and faxes may bring some adults out but their lives are just as busy as youth in care. It is personal connections that people remember. (Refer to Adult Support.)

When you do go to present your ideas be brief and clear: identify the who's, what's and when's of your project and who you are looking for to be involved. Here is a copy of the letter that the boys sent out...what do you think? Oh yea, it is also on the disk.

Flin Flon Youth In Care Network
55 Flin Flon
Flin Flon, FF
555-5555

Dear Janis Joplin.

We are writing you today about an exciting project that we are working on. In a partnership between two former youth in care and a local business owner we are attempting to provide youth in care with some recreational activities.

Before we start working on any project we must first find out from youth currently in care what they feel that they would like and need. Though we believe a pick-up basketball league may be appropriate we want to ensure that youth have a chance to direct our project. This is why we are writing you today.

We would like to visit your program and meet with young people who are residing at the Candle Stick Ranch. We are hoping that you will be able to help us organize a focus group with the young people at the ranch next week, if possible. We are able to bring treats and goodies. (sugar free, of course!) and would appreciate your support in promoting the meeting to youth. Of course we don't want youth to be forced to come, but we would value your support in encouraging youth to attend.

If you have any questions please feel free to contact us at the above number. We look forward to hearing from you.

Jon, Paul & Ringo

While building a Network or organizing a Network project, it is helpful to educate adults and professionals about your plans to help recruit more supporters. Down the road, not only are these folks your connection to youth in care but they also can prove to be great assets. They may believe in the vision of youth in care networking, and can help promote your ideas and philosophies and connect you to other decision-makers. Having said this, ensure that all of your supporters recognize the importance that it is the youth that are making decisions regarding networking or network projects! Letters like this help clear the way for strong positive relationships between adults and youth in care networks!

Six focus groups later, Jon and Paul organized a lawn bowling game, (remember, that's what the youth told them they wanted), and invited interested youth. Ringo had made sure that at each visit they had treats and as you saw, they were pretty planned for each group. They didn't waste time and from each program they had at least one interested youth. On game day, three of those young people brought some friends. Wow. In complete contrast to the first try at the basketball court, they now had youth away from the corner store and onto the lawn.

Though they noticed that there was one piece missing when all the youth came out to play. It was not only all boys, but they were all white boys. How did that happen? After looking at the process they did not realize that they too were also all white boys – the young women they spoke to didn't seem to buy in, nor did any youth of colour or aboriginal youth. They had to come up with a plan!

After the first game they knew they needed to recruit some other youth to become leaders. How would they do it? After a call to the NYICN, (don't forget your resources) and chatting up some of the adults that they had presented to who had shown interest in supporting the project, they came up with some ideas. They did presentations at the Native Friendship Center, the local women's center, the gay/lesbian/bisexual youth group and connected with the New Canadian center in their community. After recruiting three new leaders who were a bit more diverse they had a much better chance to recruit diverse youth for their recreation program. And they did. Now, not only did they have youth coming out for the games but also the youth participating came from all walks of life, with different experiences and different viewpoints.

Let's recap so far: What are ways of getting youth to the table?

- PLAN! PLAN! PLAN!
- Visit youth and invite them to participate personally.
- Respect the time you spend with the youth – it will be appreciated and recognized!
- Make strong connections – it will prove to be your greatest tool – one youth will talk to another...and another...
- Bring treats and goodies!
- Connect with adults and professionals – they are a great link to young people and can prove to be great supports!

- Ensure that your leaders and promoters of the Network and Network projects are as diverse as the youth in care in your community.

Is that it though? Not really, in fact there are lots of ideas out there. When building youth connections you will need to be creative and innovative. Use your imagination – what would bring you out to a meeting or activity? Here are some other ideas that you can build on and make work for you:

- Find a local celebrity or sports figure to champion your idea – it could be anyone from a local band, hockey player (or team), politician or even someone off the nightly news. Young people, like anyone like to meet 'famous' people. Some will get involved just to connect with these folks...I've seen it happen!
- Host an information fair for youth in care in your community – opening it up to a large number of youth and adults can increase the number of people coming out.
- Get some media attention on the project your are working on. This will help build your credibility with both youth and adults. (see Media for more information.)
- Use handmade signs, out of Bristol board, with loud and bright colours. If you go the sign route you will find young people are more responsive to these than computer generated blah blah blah posters. Catch their eye.
- If you find one youth that buys in on your first visit, have them join you for the next. Start a cycle so it's you as an organizer(s) and a youth closer in age...remember word of mouth is going to be your greatest advertiser. They may have more initial trust for a 15 year-old than for a 20-year-old.
- BE PATIENT! If you build it, they will come. Trust me, it's true, as long as they help you build.


Whew! What a lot of info to digest. Time for a break. Hey, why are you still reading, I said it was break time...relax. You're still here...get outta here! Take at least a five-minute break, just to chill out before we conclude this chapter...about time you left! You gone? Good.

HOW DO I KEEP YOUTH AT THE TABLE?


Welcome back. Did you have a nice break? What did you do? Just so you know, we are right on track with this chapter, but we couldn't have gotten this far had you not been reading. I appreciate your patience and commitment to developing a Network or Network activity in your community. Thanks. I'm going to now share some tips on how to keep youth involved once they get connected with your project.

What was that all about? I don't know you, so why was I:

- 1) Giving you a break?
- 2) Asking if you had a nice break?
- 3) Acknowledging that we are on time?
- 4) Thanking you?
- 5) Updating you on where we are in the process?



If
youth feel
that they are
cared about,
they will come
back and give
back.



Why? Translated, this bit really identifies the five things that you need to do to keep young people connected with the Network. Young people are finicky and picky about what they spend their time on. Jon, Paul and Ringo knew that after spending so much time finding out what youth wanted and getting young people connected to the Network that they couldn't lose them now...it's too important to keep them involved.

Many businesses struggle with two issues: getting new customers and keeping their existing customer base. Your Network or Network project should work towards both – recruiting and keeping! So how do you do that? Here's the translation of the piece above:

1) GIVING YOU A BREAK?


Remember youth's limits – like anyone we can't work them too hard or ask too much. Remember that they have lives, which includes school, work, other friends and other activities. As well, like I was, being a teenager you have other interests. It can be pretty overwhelming for a young person to become involved with the Network; taking on new responsibilities, supporting their peers, speaking out...we can ask too much. I have lost several youth volunteers in my time with Networks due to just that. Public talks this day, office help another, focus groups here or there...it just got too much for them. From experience it was always much harder to pull youth back into Network activities than to get them to come out the first time. Let youth dictate how much time they put in. And if you have to rely on several core youth maybe you should look at recruiting more.

2) ASKING IF YOU HAD A NICE BREAK?


Care. Care about them. That's why you're supporting other youth in care, right? Ask them about their day, how they're feeling, what they think of ideas and projects. I felt I needed to bold that question so that you would know that even though I may never meet you I do care about whether or not you had a nice break. Don't ask just ask, listen. This is how supportive and strong relationships are built. If youth feel that they are cared about, they will come back and give back. The greatest comment I had ever heard was when a youth shared with me that they felt that they belonged when they were at the Network. This hit home for me, because it was also what drove me to stay involved with Networking. People caring just makes you feel warm and fuzzy. So, yes, I do care about you...how was your break?

3) ACKNOWLEDGING THAT WE ARE ON TIME?

Remember that piece from earlier...youth in care's time is precious, don't waste it! Young people want to know that what they are working towards or are involved with is organized. A young woman who has worked for one Network that I was connected to for several years shared with me that she couldn't ever work full-time for the organization. She was pretty clear that the Network always ran by the seat-of-it's-pants, and more often than not people



As well,
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being **REALLY**
involved.



(translation = me) were running late. It was frustrating for her, yet, because I cared, I truly listened to her...and changed my ways, or at least, improved. Don't forget how valuable their time is!

4) THANKING YOU?

Common courtesy is thanking people when they do good work and try their best. This is not different for youth in care involved in Network projects. Though not perfect, I tried my hardest to always thank youth for their commitment to the organization. They may have come out for an activity, were volunteering or were a staff, it didn't really matter. I would always try to make sure they knew how appreciative we were of their involvement.

A second component here is remembering to recognize youth volunteers' involvement. I heard something several years ago that still rings true to me: Should all Canadian volunteers go on a one day strike, the country's day to day operations would collapse. What are some ideas for volunteer recognition? How about a dinner? A movie night? Or you could even nominate them (or one of them) for any awards ceremony that is hosted in your community. Just make sure you thank the youth involved with the Network...both personally and publicly!

5) UPDATING YOU ON WHERE WE ARE IN THE PROCESS?

Again, because I respect you and know that you are interested I felt that I should let you know where we are in our journey of this chapter together. The same rings true for youth. Respect them. Fill them in. This is going to help you in the long run, so that when decisions are needed to be made there are educated youth to make them. As well, being involved and updated on where things are at takes a young person from being involved to being **REALLY** involved. And isn't that what this is all about?

Don't worry, I didn't forget about our friends who were starting the Network Recreation Program. How about an update:

Jon, Paul and Ringo first started a Youth In Care Lawn Bowling Club. They invited youth to give them feedback on their project ideas and took what the youth said to heart. Yet, as they respected the youth so much and treated them so well more and more young people came out to activities hosted by the Network. At last count there were over 600 youth in care involved with their Network! They worked hard but the payoff has been great. There is now a strong Board Of Directors, (all youth, 18-24 from care), and the Network has proven to be a driving force in making change within the system. Not too shabby... considering that they started out as three...

WRAPPING IT UP LIKE A BURRITO

The scenarios I created for this chapter are real. Though I wish I could say that everything here will work all the time, in complete honesty it won't. Having said that, it will provide a strong framework for your Network or Network activities to be successful. Work hard, in partnership with youth in care and adults and make sure that everyone's involvement is **REAL**. Because, like Jon, Paul and Ringo had learned, **REAL** youth involvement is a real Revolution!



Adult Support

The most commonly asked question in "networking" has got to be, "Why does a youth in care network need adults?...Isn't it supposed to be run by youth?"

Many successful youth in care networks have some degree of adult involvement and support. This is different for each network, depending on what your network would like to offer youth in care. While some networks have paid adult staff, others are only staffed by youth in or from care. Others have adult advisory committees and sometimes even adult board members. Some networks believe that without adult support their groups would fail, where as others don't feel the need for any adult involvement.

DEFINING THE ROLE OF YOUR ADULT SUPPORTERS

Before even asking an adult to get involved, you should be really clear about what their role will look like. This will avoid confusion, and will help the adult to understand what kind of a commitment you are asking for.


Make some time to meet and decide together what areas your group needs support or advice with to help strengthen your network. Here are some ways adults can help.

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS:


- Defining the Role of Your Adult Support
- Good People to Have as Adult Supporters
- Training Your Adult Support People
- Hiring Adults

ADULTS CAN...

- help you get access to other youth in/from care. They can help you get permission to visit group homes or foster homes to present your ideas to other youth and encourage them to get involved with the group.
- promote your group to social workers, foster parents and other adults in the community. Sometimes adults will listen to other adults first, especially if they have not heard of youth in care networks or groups before.



When adults
are able to
steer us in the
right direction,
they become
our mentors.



Remember to let your adult support know the things that you want them to say on your behalf.

- help you make contact in the community with other adults that will become supporters of your group. For example, if you want to ask a lawyer for some advice, an adult supporter might be able to help you schedule your first meeting with them.
- explain the rules and regulations of the CAS or the Social Services system to you. For example, if you want to organize a day workshop for youth to discuss their concerns about being in care, adult supporters can explain who you have to talk to about this activity to get their support, i.e., the executive director of the agency, the director of residential programs, the foster care coordinator, etc., AND your adult supporters can explain what all those titles mean and what responsibilities go along with them.
- act as a mediator or a "buffer" between your group and the CAS or social services. For example, if your group holds an activity and you do not inform the appropriate adults within the system (an easy mistake to make if you do not understand how the system works), your adult supports can explain the mistake to other adults (if you choose to have them do this) and help you to avoid the same mistake again.
- help you to organize your group. They can help you decide on a good location for group meetings, show you how to develop a newsletter, teach you how to raise money for your group, help you with public relations and selling your group to other adults (to get others involved or just to inform other youth and adults that the group exists), and help organize transportation.
- help your group to learn about the rights and responsibilities of youth in/from care and what to do when those rights are being violated.

GOOD PEOPLE TO HAVE AS ADULT SUPPORTERS

When adults are able to steer us in the right direction, they become our mentors. Think of a mentor as a guide. Someone who can tell you of the twists and turns along the path and where some of the hidden dangers are. They are not there to carry you along the way, you have to do the walking for yourself.

Ultimately, it is you and the members of your group who will make the final decisions and put your plans into action. This is an important point to keep in mind, because it can be very easy to let your guide do all the work as it seems like they have all the answers and have done the task before. Be aware of this and remember the reason why networks were created in the first place: SO THAT YOU COULD BE INVOLVED IN THE CHANGES GOING ON AROUND YOU. Mentors usually get involved because they have taken a special interest in you and the members of your group. They believe in your cause and want to assist you in realizing your goals.

As "guides", adults can offer direction, and suggestions. But always remember they do not make your decisions or speak for you!

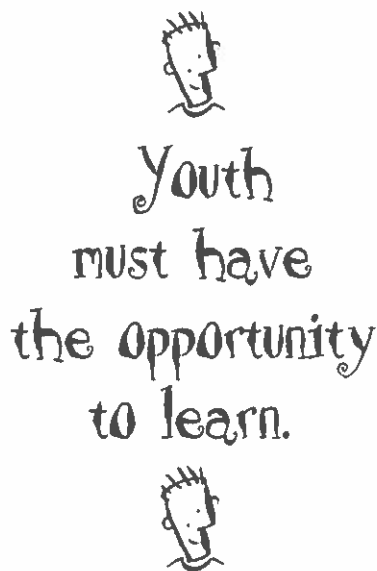


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Your group will want to find people who are supportive, and who can help with the different aspects of organizing the network. Here is a list of some of those people and examples of how they may be helpful to your network:

- **Social workers:** A social worker can help with things related to the system. They can tell other workers about your group and help get them to support you. Social workers can help you to have a better understanding of the social service system and they can help you get in contact with other youth in/from care (see the Real Youth Involvement chapter).
- **Child care workers:** A child care worker can help you get the support of other child care workers in group homes. This is especially important when you are trying to involve other youth in care from group homes and larger institutions like assessment centers and receiving homes.
- **Foster parents:** Foster parents can help promote your group to other foster parents at their own meetings or the local foster parent association's newsletter. A relationship with foster parents is important when you are trying to involve youth from foster care.
- **Fundraisers:** Involving anyone from the community who has the experience with raising money is often a good idea when your group is trying to raise funds for activities. (See Fundraising)
- **Public Relations People:** Try to find someone in your community with experience in public relations, for example someone who has experience with media (See Media) or who is the spokesperson for your local CAS or other organization. This person may also be able to help out with things like donations, or how to put a newsletter together.
- **Lawyers:** They can be especially helpful to your group if you decide to become more formal later on. Some groups decide they need to form a Board of Directors and write up a constitution for the organization. This would help your group become an incorporated non-profit organization. Lawyers can help your group understand what this means and how to go about it. They can also help your group understand the Child and Family Service Act and Family Services or Child Welfare Act in your province or territory. These acts contain the laws that outline the basic rights of all children and youth in care.
- **Former "networkers":** These are people who were once in care and have been involved in networking in the past. These people can offer advice as someone who knows where your members are coming from on a personal level and who know both the frustrations and successes of networking.
- **Child and Youth Advocates:** Many of the above people consider themselves to be advocates for young people, but there are those who have legislative authority to advocate for us (see Advocacy for more info), such as your provincial advocate or Ombudsmen (Ombudspeople). These individuals can help you with things like knowing your rights and how to exercise them, changes to the system and how this will affect you, complaints procedures and they may even be able to help with fundraising and project management.



Now you can start seeking out the adults. Once you know what you would like help with, the adults can decide whether or not they can make any of these commitments. If someone cannot do what you are asking, ask them if they can think of anything else they can do to help or if they know of someone else who might be able to get involved. It can't hurt to ask.

Once you have made your expectations of the adult clear, and they have agreed to these expectations, it's a good idea to write all of this down. Your network and the adults should have copies of this to avoid any confusion or disagreements in future.

TRAINING YOUR ADULT SUPPORT PEOPLE

Many of you are probably looking at that heading and thinking "how could I train an adult?" That's because in life, it is usually the adults who are training the youth. But remember that even those who have good intentions, and genuinely want to help may not necessarily understand terms like "youth empowerment". They may use words like... "You **MUST** do things this way...it **WON'T** work any other way...you **CAN'T** do that; the agency will **NOT** allow it...you **NEED** to do this."

These are not empowering ways of speaking to someone. If this happens, it is the responsibility of your group or an appointed member of that group to approach the adults in a calm and respectful manner. You may want to point out that you appreciate the advice but not the way it was said. They may not have realized that the way they were expressing their opinion was disempowering. Everyone makes mistakes. If they react angrily, however, you may want to reconsider asking them to be one of your main supporters as they may not be capable of providing that kind of support.

The important thing to remember is to try to remain calm even though you may feel angry at being treated this way. By remaining as calm as possible, you prove that you are a capable and responsible person. You have the right to assert yourself.

Some adults think "If you want something done right, do it yourself."

When we have experience with something, it is actually a lot easier to do it ourselves rather than taking the time to teach someone else. But how are young people supposed to learn if they don't have the opportunity to make mistakes and sometimes even fall flat on our faces, just as the adults have at times in their own lives?

Youth must have the opportunity to learn. However, people often assume what we are or aren't capable of accomplishing. Sometimes adults can do this without realizing it. They may think that they are protecting us, or that we should live by the example of their mistakes. The following is a poem, written by a former youth in care. It pretty much sums up what being an adult support is all about.

Point us in the right direction
Do not run that way and expect us to follow.
Remember it is best to let us learn
from our mistakes,
as you have learned from yours.
Do not stand in front of us for protection;
instead, stand beside us and
whisper your wisdom into our ears.
Let us lead the way,
for the future is not for you,
the future is ours to live."

Nicole E. Herbert
former youth in care

WORKSHOPS FOR ADULTS BY YOUTH

A really great way to involve adults in your network is by inviting them to a workshop. Your Child Welfare or Children's Aid services usually have foster parent training sessions or meetings for social workers to update their skills. Universities also have scheduled times throughout the year when they invite guest speakers to visit their social work program to present on a specific topic. And who better than youth in care to give a talk on what care is like?

Some networks hold what are known as symposiums. These are one day conferences where youth and adults come together to discuss developing or strengthening the local network. These are usually facilitated by youth only, but it's sometimes helpful to have at least one supportive adult who can act as an example to their own peers and maybe answer some of their questions or concerns.

The letter on the next page is what one youth had to say about how his adult support person has been helpful to him...

HIRING ADULTS

So far we've talked a lot about adult volunteers. But what about networks that hire adults to do some of the work? That's where things can get a little trickier, but it can also bring many skills that will help build your network.

Adults have experience and knowledge that youth wouldn't necessarily have, simply because they have had more time to learn. Adults can also offer a different perspective on things and can provide a bridge to other agencies, other groups of people, and new experiences. Also, because they may not have been in care, they can offer some objectivity to the group.

Continuity is also a big one. Because youth in care networks are usually run by those ages 14–24, eventually these youth move on and younger ones take our places. It's helpful to have someone who has been around for awhile and can offer some history and stability. Some adults are good for this because they may be settled in their own place, have children of their own, are 'planted' somewhere and more likely to stick around.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT BEFORE HIRING AN ADULT

- Think about the needs of your network and review models of adult staffing positions in other networks to see what fits best for you. For example, do you want an administrator, a fundraiser, a mentor/trainer; will they be full-time or part-time?
- Produce a job description that outlines things like reporting and supervision. Do they report to other youth staff or to the Board?
- Make sure that adult staff are interviewed and hired by a youth majority.
- Request at least one youth reference when hiring adults (a youth who has worked with the adult).
- Be clear from the very start about how decisions will be made in your network and incorporate this into the job description and network policies. For example, can adults ever make decisions on their own for the network or do they need board and staff input?

Adult support can be very useful in building a network. The adults who are involved in your network should always be SUPPORTIVE. I have had faith and confidence in my adult support person for over four years. Our relationship has been regulated by her good judgment as there were times when I would've had her at my panic prone call 24-7. Today when I have a problem I call her and clearly state my query and she listens. For example when I feel I am being unfairly treated, rather than chaining myself to the doors of the Legislative Building shouting obscenities and cries of injustice, I can act with integrity, dignity and honour.

There was only one occasion where my adult support person confronted me. I had said some extreme things and hurt some people's feelings. The way I was confronted was very subtle and gentle with the basic question of "How is hurting people going to help you and the network get what you need?"

Today, I am very grateful for this lesson, as I now find myself asking how will things like anger, aggression, yelling, quitting, pouting, spiting or running help me get what I want? With this in mind, I can act in such a way that attracts people to the network. Anger, aggression and quick reactions to things isolate people and networks. I have learnt in spite of myself that no matter how wrong they may be and right I may be, I cannot give people the chance to label the network as 'bad'. Adults and experience have taught me that.

Years ago, the adults were the ones who did the work in order to organize our network. All I/we/youth needed to do was show up. As I got older, I took on more responsibility as a leader. Our group grew but as our members also grew and moved on, the one remaining constant in our network were the adults. I have tried many different strategies, but without the support of these adults, the network may never have been possible.

I remember one trip home from a conference. The tension in the van was so tight you could cut it with a knife. We could've all gotten out, gone into the middle of a wheat field and duked it out. Thankfully, there was an adult there who was all like, "Okay guys, what's going on?" We did this clearance thing where everyone (without interruption) spoke their minds. Very healthy. I feel groups can die out because of little things. With the right person, little things can become the big things that make a group tight.

Remember that adult support people cannot be taken for granted. While they should be people who you can trust (i.e., not in it for the money, or because it's their job), they should also be recognized for their time. It's up to your group to decide how this is done.

Whoever your adult support person turns out to be I wish you the best of luck. You may find an adult who you can talk to about personal/emotional things and yet another for a funding proposal you are writing. If you are lucky you will have found someone possessing two unique qualities, a) he/she will care about you, and b) he/she will be an experienced advocate for youth within the child welfare system. The last thing to remember is that it takes two to build a relationship, because even if you cannot change a car tire together, at least you will have made a friend trying. And that's what matters.

Walter L. Dion, Saskatchewan

- If your network decides that all decisions related to your network need to be made by youth, then an appropriate role for the adult would be as a mentor or trainer.
- If you are a new network and are hiring youth staff and adult staff at the same time, consult with other networks first. You will need to be sure that you are hiring a young person who is comfortable and competent to challenge the adult. You may want to invite some experienced networkers to participate in your hiring process.

WHAT KINDS OF ADULTS SHOULD WE HIRE?


The following is a check list that you may want to keep on hand when interviewing or looking for potential adult staff.

- ☐ Someone who is committed to learning and listening.
- ☐ Someone who believes in the competency and potential of youth.
- ☐ Someone who is genuine and honest, NOT patronizing in the way they support youth.
- ☐ Someone with a good sense of humor.
- ☐ Someone who is committed to the philosophies and the mission of the youth network.
- ☐ Someone who is motivated and excited by youth taking on leadership roles – NOT someone who needs glory or power.
- ☐ Someone who is a strong communicator and has healthy interpersonal relationships both in their personal and professional lives.
- ☐ Someone who is connected to the community (other local agencies, ministries, etc.).
- ☐ Someone who does not try to be a social worker on the job.
- ☐ Someone with the skills YOU require for the job.

(For more information refer to Hiring, Training, and Evaluating Staff.)



Learning to work with adults is often about learning how to trust again. It is also about "unlearning" and chipping away at the walls that have protected us for so long. These things will lead you to the kinds of people that will help your network grow. Keep your minds and your eyes open – you'll find them!



"Conflict" can mean change. BUT, if it isn't handled in a way that is respectful of all those involved, this change can be negative and get out of control.



CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS:

- Understanding The Word Conflict
- Recognizing Conflicts
- During Meetings
- Defusing Conflict
- Safety Issues

Conflict

UNDERSTANDING THE WORD CONFLICT

The word "conflict" scares many people. One of the reasons for this is because it is usually associated with words like anger and violence. There are other words that can be confused because of the feelings that can be associated with them. For example, the word "discipline" does not mean hitting, spanking, or even punishing. However, many of us have been taught exactly the opposite.

"Conflict" can mean change. BUT, if it isn't handled in a way that is respectful of all those involved, this change can be negative and get out of control.

Say for example your network is deciding on a fundraising project. There are three different ideas out on the table. Some of the youth want to have a car wash, some want to hold a raffle and others want a dance. Your group is having a really hard time agreeing as all of the ideas are good, but everyone thinks their idea is the best.

The car wash group argues that because the network has experience with these already, the group won't have to spend so much time planning. It's also cheap to organize.

The raffle group argues that they can make more money than the car wash because they can advertise to all of the agencies and the larger community.

The dance group believes that their idea is the best because it's fun, will attract youth, and make loads of cash through ticket sales, refreshments and door prizes.

During this conversation, two youth (we'll call them Sally and John) become angry at one another and begin to argue about which idea is the best. This becomes personal when John says that Sally is a control freak and has to have everything her way. Sally says that John doesn't have a lot of experience with networking so he should do more listening and less talking.

Members of the group are now beginning to take sides, while a few others decide to leave the group because it has become uncomfortable. Sally and John begin shouting across the table at each other, trying to out-do one another with verbal insults. This takes up the majority of the meeting and by the time the meeting is over, the only thing that has been achieved are bad feelings.

RECOGNIZING CONFLICTS

Conflicts can be quite obvious at times, such as in the above example.

Basically, it is a disagreement between two or more people and can be based on things like personalities, values, beliefs or lack of communication. Other conflicts are less obvious and can come out in ways like,

- youth not showing up or speaking at meetings because they don't feel they will be involved or heard;
- youth feeling too intimidated to speak up, even if no one in the group has given them a reason to be. As children, they may have been taught that they were stupid, with nothing good to say; or

- youth controlling the meetings or projects so that their voice is the loudest and holds the most power when making decisions.

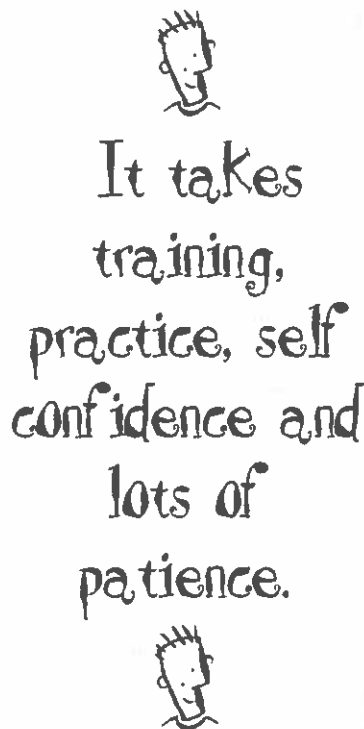
It is important to remember that although you may have a disagreement with someone, it does not mean that you are now enemies. It does mean that in order to respect and consider everyone's opinion, we must try to be OPEN MINDED. When we take the time to consider different opinions, we are not only involving everyone, but we are also giving ourselves the opportunity to learn something that we might not have considered before.

DURING MEETINGS:

By making sure that everyone is heard and has the time to clearly explain their ideas or opinions we are immediately avoiding negative conflicts. It may be a good idea to sit down as a group and decide from the very beginning how your meetings are held or decisions are made. Decide what is and isn't acceptable within your group. Here is a sample list that you can refer to...

- One person will be designated by the group as "chair". This will ensure that all those present have a chance to speak without interruption.
- All opinions and experiences must be respected and taken seriously.
- Any discriminatory comments will not be tolerated whether these are about race, gender, religion, income, age, ability, sexual orientation, education, etc. This means that any person who verbally insults a group member will be asked to leave.
- No power tripping. All group members should be treated equally, no matter how long they have been involved with the group. The group is owned by all of us, not one person.
- Physical, verbal or any other type of intimidation will not be tolerated. All group members must feel that the network is a safe place to be.
- If any of the group members have personal conflicts with each other, we ask that they leave this "at the door", meaning group members will respect each other and try to work together during meetings or events.
- A Talking Stone (or stick, or feather...) will be used at all meetings. Whoever is holding the stone is the only person allowed to speak at that time. All group members will have the opportunity to hold the stone.

You can also check out Board and Committees for more tips on who does what.



Even if your group has a list like this, conflicts can still arise. When tempers flare or feelings are hurt, your list of rules may not matter to the individuals who are in conflict at that moment. This is when you need to start taking other steps to defuse it.

DEFUSING IT

You've probably all heard about the Bomb Squad. These are people who defuse bombs for a living. Not everyone's dream job, but somebody's got to do it. This is a very intricate and complicated task and pulling the wrong wires could have tragic results. It takes training, practice, self confidence and lots of patience. Although very different, defusing conflict requires the same four principles because reacting or confronting it in the wrong way can have some seriously negative outcomes.

This is where mediators come in handy. A mediator is basically someone who acts as a "go-between", middle person, or even liaison between two or more people. This person intervenes or explains things in an objective way with the hope that the two sides can connect or see eye-to-eye.

Let's go back to Sally and John...

John has just finished telling Sally that she is a control freak and Sally comes back by saying that John should do more listening and less talking. You can see that things are getting a little crazy and that group members are becoming uncomfortable. You are recognizing a conflict. What should you do?

Some suggestions...

- Suggest that the group take a short break to calm down. Perhaps Sally and John should go for a walk, in different directions and come back when they don't feel like yelling anymore.
- Refer back to your list of rules. In any way are Sally or John breaking any of the rules that they helped to create? If so, should they be asked to leave? This is something to ask the rest of the group.
- Ask Sally and John if they can calm down right now and focus on the work that needs to be done. If one or both of them cannot calm down, the group should decide whether they wish to continue the conversation without John and Sally or if they should come back to it at another time.
- Put some ideas out on the table that will help the group to reach a workable compromise. For example, is there anyway that the two or even all three of the fundraising ideas can be combined into one big project? Or ask that each of the groups brainstorm for an hour around why their project is the best choice at this time. Ask them to do a presentation that will support their idea.
- Take a vote as a group. If you decide that majority rules, (see Boards and Committees chapter), this will make it a fair and easy process. It will also take the focus off of one person.

What if none of the above ideas are working? What if John and Sally are becoming angrier by the second? Your group has a few options...

Option #1 John and Sally are making the environment uncomfortable and perhaps even unsafe. It may be time to ask that they leave the group either until the next meeting or until the group feels confident that they have dealt with their differences. It may be a good idea for the group to vote on this.

Option #2 Ask to meet with John and Sally alone to help them work out some of their conflicts with each other. There may be a lot more going on here than just project ideas.

Let's say they agreed to a meeting with you as the mediator. During the meeting, both Sally and John are sitting on either sides of the room, arms folded, no eye contact. Your role is to help start off the conversation without lecturing or patronizing.

- 1.) Explain your role. Tell them that you are not there to counsel, take sides or give your personal opinions. You are there to help them understand each other a little better and hopefully get them to the point where they can work together again.
- 2.) You may start by acknowledging how good it is that they could both show up to meet because it proves that the group is important to them. You can ask them both to talk about why they are involved with the group or what it means to them. This will help both Sally and John understand each other a little better and put things into perspective.
- 3.) Ask if it's okay to explain to each of them what you saw at that meeting and how it affected group members. Hold them accountable for their actions and ask them to explain how they can avoid this the next time.
- 4.) Ask each of them to think about why they became angry and ways that they could have confronted each other differently.
- 5.) Ask them to consider whether or not they are able to work together in future. If they are, they may want to work together on developing a list of ways that will help them and the group avoid this kind of conflict in the future. Tell them that the group is uncomfortable with them right now and need to be convinced that Sally and John have worked out their differences.
- 6.) Remember this: THERE IS NOTHING WORSE THAN A FORCED GROUP HUG...unless of course they suggest it.

Let's say during the meeting you discover that John was angry with Sally because he did not feel she welcomed him when he starting attending meetings. He says that she has been giving him bad vibes from the start and talks to him like he is a moron. He never said anything before because he thought the rest of the group would gang up on him for talking back to their leader. He says it has been very hard to be taken seriously in the group because all of the youth think Sally's word is biblical. Finally, he had had enough and decided that she was going to hear what he had to say.



As the
mediator, it is
your job to pay
close attention
to what is
being said.



Sally says that she has always been the leader of the group and when John starting coming to meetings she thought he was trying to take that away from her. She didn't like the way he questioned all of her ideas or the way he disrespected her experience. When he called her a control freak she reacted angrily because he humiliated her in front of her peers. She thought that the group members would agree with John because, whether he sees it or not, they have a lot of respect for him.

As the mediator, it is your job to pay close attention to what is being said. In this example not only have John and Sally both admitted where they were wrong but have also said some positive things about one another. This is what you should try to point out to them. By doing this, you are helping them to recognize that the working relationship is worth salvaging – and may even be a friendship!

SAFETY

What if John and Sally aren't able to see eye to eye? What if the conflict worsens and continues to disturb the group? Or worse, what do you do if a conflict becomes physical?

Again, refer back to your list of rules. What has your group decided to do if any group member's safety is put at risk? Each group will need to decide what is best for them. Some things to keep in mind are...

- 1.) Let group members know that physical violence will not be tolerated.
- 2.) If a member is making the group unsafe, they will be told to leave indefinitely or until the group is okay with their return.
- 3.) Let them know that if a physical attack takes place within the group, the authorities will be contacted and charges could be laid.

OTHER TIPS:

You may want to ask someone who is familiar with conflict resolution techniques to come in and give a workshop to your group. Some of these people may be social workers, foster parents, teachers, guidance counsellors or peer counsellors.

The most important things to remember are...

- 1.) Conflict means change. Depending on how it is dealt with, this change can be negative or positive.
- 2.) Keep a cool head. Remember the poem "IF"? There is one line that says, "If you can keep your head, while others around you are losing theirs..." (or something like that). The point is that by keeping things under control you will be better equipped to deal with things calmly and objectively. Not adding fuel to the fire.
- 3.) Encourage the group to remain OPEN-MINDED. They may just learn something.
- 4.) Challenge one another to stick to the group rules.
- 5.) Remain objective. Try not to take sides when conflict arises. Both sides should be heard, and taking sides could rob someone of this opportunity.
- 6.) Be honest about how you feel. Sometimes group members won't say whether they agree or disagree with a suggestion or decision because they feel intimidated. Try to make it a policy that all group members are expected to be honest and that everything will be done to make sure that it is safe for them to do this.
- 7.) RESPECT yourself and each other.

Advocacy

ADVOCACY AND YOUR NETWORK

A youth in care network can provide peer support, peer understanding and peer help. In other words, peer advocacy. Because you are a peer, youth in care WILL come to you for advice around some fairly heavy-duty issues. It's extremely important to be informed before attempting to inform someone else.

WHAT IS PEER ADVOCACY?

First, let's look at those two words. Peers are individuals who share common ground. This could mean that they have had the same life experiences, similar jobs or are of the same culture, religion or age group. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition describes advocacy as:

The act of pleading or arguing in favor of something; such as a cause, idea, or a policy; active support and defines the word 'Advocate' (noun) as,

- 1.) *One that argues for a cause; a supporter or defender, an advocate for civil rights.*
- 2.) *One that pleads on another's behalf; an intercessor (advocates for abused children and spouses).*

Peer Advocacy – A tool for youth in care to voice their concerns, questions or disagreements with decisions made about their lives. It is a process for young adults to aid their peers (other young adults) in voicing their viewpoint to the decision makers.

You may already be familiar with the different types of advocacy other than this one, but we're going to explain what those are and how to use them.

Systemic Advocacy – This is a process where a helper recognizes and tracks a group of problems and issues that various youth in care are experiencing, regardless of their child welfare status. These problems may be coming from a weakness in the system's legislation, policy or procedures.

Self Advocacy – This is when a person advocates for or helps themselves. We are able to advocate on our own behalf when we know how to speak for ourselves, who to speak to and have a real understanding of the policies and procedures that affect us directly.

WHO ARE ADVOCATES?

Advocates are like helpers. They have many different faces and can vary in age. They can be formal or informal.

A formal advocate is a person who is granted permission to advocate by way of legislation (or law). Two examples of formal advocates are lawyers or your provincial children's advocate. Some provinces do not have child advocates, but have other resources, like the provincial Ombudsman or Ombudsman or Children's Commissioner.

Each province and territory gives their children's advocate permission to advocate on behalf of children and youth in care. All child advocates work dif-

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS:

- Advocacy And Your Network
- What Is Peer Advocacy
- Who Are Advocates?
- Peer Advocate's Checklist
- Self Advocacy
- Exercises: Self Inventory and Peer Advocacy Scenarios

WHAT'S ON THE DISK?

- Self Inventory
- Peer Advocacy Scenarios

ferently as the rules and policies or child welfare acts for young people in their “care” are different from province to province. A lawyer’s power to advocate on behalf of anyone in the community is the responsibility of the individual law society acts of each province.

An informal advocate has no legislative (or legal) authority to advocate but can help a person to understand the system, their rights, and how to exercise their rights to affect decision-makers. Examples of informal advocates are:

- friends
- teachers
- neighbours
- siblings, foster siblings
- parents, foster parents
- care givers (group home staff, social workers)
- grandparents, aunts, uncles
- peers

IF AN INFORMAL ADVOCATE HAS NO LEGAL AUTHORITY, HOW CAN THEY TRULY BE A HELPER?

The advantage that these advocates have over formal advocates is that they have probably already established a relationship or an understanding with the individuals they are trying to help. For example, a young person from care is in a great position to understand another youth in care’s concerns, opinions, experiences and even their feelings. This is because, as people from care, we know the daily realities of that system first-hand. However, no two people from care are exactly alike. We are all unique individuals, and as such, feel and perceive things on different levels. This is something to keep in mind when working with your peers.

HOW CAN A PEER ADVOCATE HELP A YOUTH IN CARE VOICE HIS/HER VIEWPOINTS TO DECISION-MAKERS?

Good question. At times the decisions that decision-makers (like social workers, foster parents, judges, guidance counsellors, lawyers and sometimes biological family members) make are not always the best or they just don’t feel right. This is especially common when the young person has not been involved in the decision-making process. When it seems as though the adults won’t listen or don’t seem to understand, a peer advocate can be extremely useful. The following is an example of how one peer advocate helped “Perry”, a young woman in care.

Perry went into care at the age of 13. She has lived in a total 2 foster homes, three group homes, several hostels and custody. At the age of 17, Perry flip-flopped between her group home and “squats” (abandoned houses, or buildings). At the age of 18, she was put onto an independent living program where she had her own place and was attending an alternative school. However, this arrangement ultimately failed as Perry was suffering from clinical depression and needed immediate attention. Her social worker told Perry that she must get psychiatric treatment, or child welfare would terminate her wardship. Perry

agreed to go into a treatment center, even though the only available bed was in another city.

Perry followed through with her promise and the treatment program. Prior to this, her social worker told her that the local child welfare agency would take on her file and assign her a new temporary worker. Although Perry had made several efforts to contact this new worker, she received no visits and her calls were not returned. She knew that once she was discharged from the center she would need money to buy food, find a place to live and pay bills.

A resident of the center who had been involved in networking told Perry about the local youth in care network and advised her to check them out. Perry was hesitant at first as her past experiences with care had been negative, but her friend explained that this was different. It was a place she could go where she would be welcomed rather than judged by people who knew where she was coming from.

Perry called the youth in care network and told them of her situation. This was their phone conversation:

Perry: Hi, uh...I was given this number by a friend and I have some questions. I don't have to give you my name or anything do I?

Jessie: No, that's okay. What would you like to ask?

Perry: Well, I need to know how to get a hold of my worker so I can get my cheque when I get out of here.

Jessie: Okay. Can I ask where "out of here" is?

Perry: The psych ward, but don't worry I'm not crazy.

Jessie: You don't sound it either. Are you in care right now?

Perry: Yeah, but I just moved to the city to get some help, but I decided that I don't want to move back. I need a place and stuff.

Jessie: Have you tried calling your worker in your home city?

Perry: I did call her and she said that I have a new worker here. She said that the new worker would take care of it.

Jessie: Have you called the new worker?

Perry: Like a thousand times! She isn't returning my phone calls and she hasn't come to see me once.

Jessie: How about your social worker's supervisor? Would you be comfortable calling them?

Perry: Why – so I can wait around for another phone call? I'd probably rot before I heard anything.

Jessie: Maybe the supervisor doesn't know that you haven't been contacted yet. Maybe if you call him or her, they can help.

Perry: I don't know their name. What would I say?

Jessie: Well, you have a few choices. You can call the agency and ask for your worker's supervisor. You may not get through right away, but let them know that this is an emergency. They will get back to you. If you still don't hear anything, then you can call the director of the agency. Directors are usually really busy, but tell reception you want the director's voice mail and leave a detailed message explaining your situation. If none of this works, we can call on your behalf but we would need to know a little more information.

Perry: I don't want to cause any shit. They might kick me out of care.

Jessie: Do you know that it is your right to talk to your worker? If they're not calling you back, then you are legally allowed to call their supervisor and complain. Has anyone ever told you your rights?

Perry: Yeah – when I went into care. But that was a long time ago. They also had some posters up in my group home, but I never really paid attention to them because I didn't believe it.

Jessie: I can explain them to you now if you have time.

Perry: Okay – but can we also talk more about getting my cheque after?

Jessie then took the time to go over some rights with Perry and explained who the Child Advocate was. Perry voiced several situations from her past where she could have really used someone like that.

During their conversation, Jessie did several things that every peer advocate should keep in mind:

- 1.) He did not push Perry into saying anything she did not want to. For example, he respected that Perry did not want to give her name, or give the name of her social worker.
- 2.) He asked Perry what she had already done before telling her what she SHOULD do.
- 3.) Jessie asked Perry appropriate questions to better help him understand her situation. This also helped Jessie to decide whether or not he was the best person to help, or if he should encourage Perry to call another resource.
- 4.) Jessie remained calm, friendly and positive throughout the conversation. Even when Perry sounded as though she wanted to give up, Jessie continued to support her while giving her several options to help herself. He also let Perry know that the network was there to act on her behalf if she wanted them to.
- 5.) Jessie made sure that Perry was aware of her rights and her options. He empowered her!

Following this conversation, Perry called the supervisor. She had also taken the time to draft a letter to the director, just in case. The supervisor returned her call promptly and explained that her “new” worker had been moved to another department. Perry was then assigned another new worker and received a visit within a few days. When Perry left the center, her worker helped her to find a place, a doctor and visited her on a regular basis, cheque in hand.

Since then, Perry made contact with the youth in care network and has volunteered with them ever since...she even told them her name!

PEER ADVOCATE'S CHECKLIST

The following is a list of basic rules when practicing Peer Advocacy:

1. The main focus of peer advocacy is to enable the youth to speak for him or herself or to give instructions to a formal advocate to voice his or her concerns and viewpoints.
2. A goal of peer advocacy is to enhance the young person's natural relationships rather than trying to replace them.
3. Peer advocates must recognize and respect the youth's rights as an individual:
 - The right to privacy and confidentiality.
 - The right to know and maintain biological, cultural, religious and linguistic heritage.
 - The right to choose sexual orientation, without prejudice.
 - The right to receive notice of and to participate in the decision making process.
 - The right to be given access to information about the child welfare system and legislation.
 - The right to maintain continuous and stable relationships.
 - The right to participate in developing a plan of care and accessing services that are consistent with the youth's viewpoints, interests and needs.
 - The right to be given information about avenues of appealing decisions.
4. Peer advocates must make a promise to themselves not to let youth go through what they themselves went through when they were in care, if the experience was negative.
5. Peer advocates must realize that it is an honour to act as a role model or a mentor for other youth in and from care.
6. Advocacy seeks solutions and not retribution.
7. All participants in the advocacy process are to be treated with respect and dignity, regardless of their role.
8. The peer advocate must recognize and respect the youth's decision to be or not to be advocated for.



Should an informal advocate take on a situation when they are not properly informed, trained or given permission by way of legislation, the consequences could be extremely damaging to your youth in care network, the peer advocate and most importantly, the young person seeking help.



Perry and Jessie are just one example of how peer advocates can be helpful to other youth in and from care. Fortunately, this situation had a positive ending; however, there are some situations where it is inappropriate for youth or other informal advocates to act on someone else's behalf. Should an informal advocate take on a situation when they are not properly informed, trained or given permission by way of legislation, the consequences could be extremely damaging to your youth in care network, the peer advocate and most importantly, the young person seeking help.

Let's go back to Perry and Jessie. Say, for example, Jessie had told Perry that he would go directly to child welfare to confront the director on her behalf. Without knowing the full story, Jessie arrives at the agency and storms into the director's office demanding an explanation and a cheque. It is more than likely that the director would not respond well to this, causing bad relations between child welfare and the youth in care network. This also robs Perry of the opportunity to advocate on her own behalf.

Another example would be an abuse disclosure. What if Perry were calling Jessie because she was being abused in her group home? First, Jessie should know to tell Perry that he is obligated by law to report any abuse or threat of abuse to the proper authorities. (If you haven't already, read the Local Development Worker's Survival Guide to learn more about handling abuse disclosures.) He can also tell Perry what his boundaries are. This lets her know ahead of time how he will be involved as a support person, and when others will need to step in.

After Perry has told Jessie the full story, he lets her know that there are a few different people that they can go to together for help. He mentions the child advocate, her social worker or her worker's supervisor, and the police. He adds that if Perry can think of anyone else that she would be comfortable going to, that this would be an option. By doing this, Jessie is further helping Perry to maintain some control over her life.

In this case, Perry may have agreed to allow Jessie to call the child advocate on her behalf. Because the Child Advocate is a formal advocate, they are legally permitted to conduct an investigation into the disclosure. Can you imagine what would happen if instead of going to the Advocate, Jessie confronted the group home or the person(s) accused of the abuse? There is a good chance that the claim would be denied, Perry could wind up homeless or further abuse could take place.

As a peer advocate you WILL hear stories like these. Make sure you are prepared!

SELF ADVOCACY

With so many different types of advocates out there, why would anyone need to know how to advocate for themselves? As youth in and from care, we know that the care system isn't perfect. While in care, there is always the possibility that our needs may not be met. Perhaps our rights are being violated or we're just not being heard.



Self Advocacy
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We also know that "care" is temporary. Eventually, we all have to go out into the world and be completely independent. For these reasons, it could be said that Self Advocacy is the most important of all because it is the skill that will carry us through life.

Points to remember when supporting or practicing Self Advocacy:

- We are our own best advocates.
- Everyone is competent or is able to voice his or her own viewpoints to the decision makers. REMEMBER – a youth in care is the "expert" when it comes to their own well being.
- Lack of knowledge will frustrate and silence a youth's voice.
- Ownership of knowledge IS power. It is crucial that the advocates EDUCATE the young person, equipping them with the understanding of the policies and procedures of the system.

Just by reading this manual, you are practicing self advocacy. You are educating yourself on how you can better assist and support your peers. You may even be learning how to handle situations in your personal life. As the old saying goes, "you can't help anyone, if you can't help yourself."

Using the "Self Inventory" exercise, on the next page, is a good way to learn about yourself in terms of what your personal values and beliefs are, how you react to certain situations and issues, and even how you view yourself as an individual. Take the time to think out your answers to ensure that you are giving a true representation of yourself. This self inventory exercise is saved on disk.

SELF INVENTORY

What are some values that focus on youth in care? Answer true or false to the following statements.

- ☐ A youth in care is a valued member of society.
- ☐ A youth in care has interests that need to be recognized and protected.
- ☐ A youth in care needs stability and continuity of relationships.
- ☐ A youth in care needs cultural, familial, social and/or religious roots that must be recognized as an important part of developing self-awareness and self worth.
- ☐ A sense of equality in the eyes of society (i.e., equal opportunities to income, housing, etc.)

WHAT ARE MY BELIEFS?

What are my attitudes towards	Positive	Negative
• Youth	_____	_____
• Youth in care	_____	_____
• Young offenders	_____	_____
• Gays, lesbians, trans-gender	_____	_____
• Sexual assault perpetrators	_____	_____
• Prostitutes	_____	_____
• Persons with disabilities	_____	_____
• Native or Inuit persons	_____	_____
• Immigrants	_____	_____
• People of colour	_____	_____
• Men	_____	_____
• Women	_____	_____
• Adults	_____	_____
• Social Workers	_____	_____
• Homeless youth (squeegy kids)	_____	_____
• Deaf persons	_____	_____
• People living with mental illness	_____	_____

After completing the self inventory, take some time to reflect on your answers and ask yourself if the answers are really a true representation of you or if you just going through the motions of completing an exercise.

In your role as a peer advocate, you will be faced with a number of situations where there are issues you may not agree with. How will you function as a peer advocate when you don't believe in the end result that the youth is seeking? There is one answer to this question – remember your role as a peer advocate which is: to assist the youth in voicing his or her viewpoints, concerns and interests to the decision makers. Having a clear vision of yours and the networks values, beliefs, and attitudes before you take on the role of peer advocate will better prepare you for potentially conflicting situations.

For argument's sake, let's say that you've worked through the self inventory, learned values relating to youth in care, become familiar with the principles of advocacy and now you are faced with a "value conflict". What would you do?

Review the following two scenarios and think about your response. What is the conflict, what is your immediate response and what is your final decision?

Please note that these scenarios are also on the disk and you are encouraged to add to these as your network sees fit.

Scenario 1

"David" is a 15 year old Permanent Ward (in care of child welfare until his 18th birthday). He thinks he is gay and wants to talk to someone about it. David has tried to talk with his social worker but she's homophobic and will not discuss this with him. David's foster parents have told him that it's just a stage that he's going through and that he'll grow out of it. David asks you if you think he's crazy and if he'll grow out of it.

Is there a conflict?

Are you uncomfortable with David's openness about his sexuality or in any way uncomfortable with this situation? Will your own feelings or beliefs have a negative impact on David? Is it difficult to remain objective?

Response

After considering this, if you answered yes to these questions it's a good idea to think about whether or not you are the best person to help. Instead of attempting to deal with the situation when you are unsure of your own feelings, perhaps referring David to someone who is better equipped to help him would be your best route.

There are lesbian, bi-sexual, gay or transgendered youth organizations who are trained to support youth and their families around sexuality and the conflicts that can arise. Always know what services exist in your area so that you can suggest or refer youth to agencies that can help. It's important to remember that the problem here is not with David and his sexuality – the problem is his relationship and lack of communication with his foster parents and social worker.

If you answered no to these questions, you may want to consider asking some of the following questions...

Why do you believe that your social worker is homophobic?

How did you come out to your foster parents and social worker?

By asking these two simple questions you are getting the background information on the situation and without blaming David, you are challenging him to think about why he believes his worker is homophobic. By asking David to walk you through the conversation, you'll get a good sense of how he expressed his feelings and if these were clearly stated or effective.

What are you going to do about it?

You may have some suggestions of how David could re-address this with the adults in his life. Together you could do a role play where you are the adult and David is coming out to you.

This may not be an option. David may be asking for something more like mediation, where another person is present to help him explain his feelings. Or, he may just want to be connected with some of his peers or a supportive adult who he can go to for advice. It's up to you to ask these questions, and help David figure out what is best for him!

Letting David know that you are there for him is one of the best things you can do. By remaining objective and supportive instead of judging him, you are helping David to figure this one out on his own.

Scenario 2

You are an 18 year old male who has just been hired as a Development Worker with your local youth in care in network. You have completed your training and have been assigned to visit a group home in your area. During this visit, you meet Trudy. Trudy is in disagreement with her social worker about being removed from her current home and placing her into a more "structured" placement. Trudy meets with you to discuss her viewpoints and the two of you get along quite well. At the end of the meeting, Trudy asks you out on a date.

Is there a conflict?

Well, it really depends on how you see your role. **Some questions to ask yourself...** Do I take my job seriously? What does that mean to me? If a social worker or a child advocate agreed to go on a date with a youth in care would there be consequences and why? Am I attracted to this person? Can I have a relationship with this person and still maintain a professional relationship?

Depending on how you answered yourself, you probably already know whether or not there is a conflict.

Response

Let's say you decide to turn Trudy's invitation down. Does this mean you will not be able to work with her afterward? Chances are, it could be difficult because of her attraction toward you (and maybe because of your attractions



Youth may be coming to you as a last resort. They have tried to work with the system and have watched it fail time and again. Treat their concerns, questions and stories with the respect and dignity they deserve and remember that your role is not to solve the problem for them, but to help them find their own way.



toward her). It's important to be up-front with Trudy from the very beginning because mixed messages could make things confusing and very uncomfortable.

Respecting her is crucial. Tell her that you are flattered, but that because of your role it would be wrong for you to date. You don't want to embarrass her or belittle her feelings, whether they are temporary or not. Explain that it would be difficult for you to help her.

Let her know that you have boundaries, explain what these are and that these must be respected if you are to continue working together. If she can respect these, then it is very possible that you could still help Trudy with her situation and possibly become good friends.

However, if Trudy was upset by your response or agreed to your boundaries at first but did not respect them afterward, what then? Unless Trudy is somehow putting you or herself in danger, remember your role as a peer advocate. Again, refer to your checklist.

What actions will ensure that Trudy gets the help she needs, but still allow you to maintain your values and beliefs?

It may be time to act as a referral. Speak with Trudy and help her to understand that although you want to help, you don't believe that you are the best person to do it at this time.

You can also challenge Trudy in a positive way by helping her to take responsibility for her actions. Remind her that she agreed to respect your boundaries and yet, crossed the line after promising not to. Tell her that your role now is to help her find someone she is comfortable with who can work with her and her worker.

If you make these kinds of promises, make sure you keep them! Try not to just walk away from a situation (unless of course you are in immediate danger) without leaving your peers with some kind of alternative suggestions or solutions.

Remember, we are all human and are entitled to make mistakes.

As a peer advocate, many situations will arise where you will need to ask yourself if you are the best person to help. Youth may be coming to you as a last resort. They have tried to work with the system and have watched it fail time and again. Treat their concerns, questions and stories with the respect and dignity they deserve and remember that your role is not to solve the problem for them, but to help them find their own way.

(See the Resource List for the number of your Province's or Territories Child Advocate/Ombudsmen contact information.)

(For more info on working with your peers see The Local Development Worker's Survival Guide.)

PROJECTS

In the “Fundraising” and “Real Youth Involvement” chapters, we have given you some basic tips on coordinating network projects for and by youth in care. In this chapter, we have outlined three projects that you can do. Two of the projects were brought to us by youth in care groups in British Columbia and New Brunswick. Special thanks to Laura Lee for sharing her experience with the Luggage Drive and to Angie for sending us information on the Welcoming Project.

NEWSLETTERS. WHY NEWSLETTERS?

One of the most common network projects is the newsletter. The reasons for this are simple. Newsletters:

- 1.) enable youth in care networks to get their message out to their peers locally, provincially and sometimes nationally.
- 2.) are a way for youth across your city or province to get involved, even if they can't always be around the network in person. By sending their poems, opinions, stories, questions, updates or artwork, they are contributing and getting their voices heard.
- 3.) can inform both youth in care and the system about network projects and lets them know how they can get involved.
- 4.) can inform the reader about the decisions that the system makes on their behalf, such as changes to legislation, their rights, responsibilities (yup! We've got those too!) and opportunities.
- 5.) remind us that we are not alone!

Newsletters are a very popular and frequent way for organizations, businesses, schools and government to get their message out. In fact, there are so many of them floating around these days that there really isn't enough time to read each and every deserving one of them.

With that in mind, when creating a newsletter, you should consider a few things...

- 1.) Who are our main readers?
- 2.) Why will they want to read our newsletter?
- 3.) How will we contact them?
- 4.) How often will we write it?
- 5.) What are the costs involved and how will we pay for them?

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS:

- Newsletters
- The Luggage Drive
- The Welcoming Project

1.) Who are our main readers?

Well, youth in care of course! Anyone else? You probably identified others such as social workers, directors of child welfare, foster parents, child advocates and maybe a few interested MLA's, MNA's or MPP's – maybe.



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Before we get you all confused and prematurely fed up with that tall order, it's good to keep in mind that your first priority is to the youth reader. There are lots of newsletters and reports floating around out there. These are available for anyone to read, however you probably won't stumble upon the average 15-year-old foster kid thumbing through child welfare's latest annual report...and they shouldn't need to.

The hard truth is that the information that exists about the system is 99.9% written by the adults for the adults. Until that starts to change, a newsletter is a way for youth to communicate and share your "in care" experiences and ways you CAN take control over your lives. Don't give a second thought to the fact that some adults may read it. Do not adjust your language or try to sound like a social worker when writing your articles, because youth won't want to read it. If adults don't get the way you write, they have the option to put it down and pick up that 15-year-old's discarded copy of the annual report.

2.) Why will they want to read it?

In addition to language, visual presentation is also very important. So far, we have used the word newsletter – a lot. But don't feel that you MUST limit your creativity to fit that mold. Some networks publish what they call "zines". Zines (short for magazines) are basically newsletters but are often more radical in appearance and content. They can also give a young, real perspective on things.

Most zines are written by independent writers and used to be considered underground, but are now much more mainstream. Most have a particular theme like music, art, movies, culture, or social activism...the usual. Your zine should probably have a youth in care theme, but remember that you are more than what your file says about you or what kind of status you hold in care. All of us have many interests; so it's okay to write about the different aspects of our lives and how it all affects us.

What's in a name?

You should also consider the title of your publication. Discuss it with your network, come up with a few different titles and see what fits best. Or you could run a contest in the first few publications for youth in care in your region or province to create one. Your network could offer prizes donated by local businesses, like movie passes or gift certificates. When coming up with a name, try to keep it fun, unique and youth-friendly.

Art work can definitely make or break your newsletter. You could try using some clip art, but free hand artwork will make your publication more interesting and unique. If your network has the budget you might consider hiring a youth in care to design the art work for each newsletter. You might offer them a \$40 or \$50 honorarium for each newsletter they design. Lastly, if you know of any youth in care who are artists, offer them some space in your newsletter to show off their talents. Or, if you have any photographs of youth in care working on a project, this may be a good thing to feature (make sure you get their permission before publishing their photograph or name!!!).



If you say that your newsletter is written both BY and FOR youth in care, then one of your most rewarding (and sometimes frustrating) tasks will be to encourage your peers to submit their writing.



And the number one reason for WHY youth will want to read your amazing newsletter...because THEY WROTE IT!!! If you say that your newsletter is written both BY and FOR youth in care, then one of your most rewarding (and sometimes frustrating) tasks will be to encourage your peers to submit their writing.

The frustrating part of this is even though you may ask youth to contribute, you must remember that they have their own lives and may not have the time to contribute something for each and every newsletter. Steer away from always asking the same people. There is a good chance that there are youth in your area who have journals full of poetry, song lyrics, whatever, but don't have enough confidence in their own abilities to send any of it in. And, there is always the problem of contacting the youth to let them know that:

- a) a network exists and that you publish this really cool newsletter, and
- b) it's written ONLY by and for youth in and from care.

3.) How do we contact the youth? Getting the 411...

You can encourage adults to assist you in distributing your newsletter to your peers by contacting social workers, foster parent associations and your department of social services. (Refer to How-Top's and Real Youth Involvement for details on how to do this.)

4.) How often will we write it?

Lesson number one: writing a newsletter is TIME CONSUMING, especially for the first few tries, because you will make the most mistakes during the first few editions, but you will learn from them. Mistakes like spelling errors, mixing up names, forgetting to add contact information like the network's phone # or how to get in touch with the child advocate are bound to happen. Also, be prepared to do most of the writing yourself for a while, or at least until you can find contributors.

Although you may want to publish your newsletter every month, don't make any promises until you have actually seen for yourself what kind of work is involved. Some networks have started their newsletters by writing a two-page (one page double-sided) introduction letter to the newsletter. This basically lets the reader know how they can contact you and that your network plans on writing more in the coming months.

5.) How much will it cost?

Another thing to remember is that newsletters COST MONEY. Everything from the paper you print it on to the cost of postage will need to be considered. If you do not have enough money to work with (see the Fundraising chapter), you could try finding some donations. Ask your local agency for the paper and perhaps the use of their photocopier for the first few editions. Maybe the local high school or other community organizations like the Boys and Girls Club, Big Brother's and Big Sisters or the John Howard Society would be interested in supporting this. The postage might be a bit trickier. As mentioned

earlier, you could ask that the Foster Parents Association or Child Welfare include it in their own mail out.

Thanking them...

It's a good thing to thank the contributors of your newsletter, whether they donated their writing, artwork, money, time, materials or postage. Also, when you are looking for donations, your chances of actually receiving them are better if you mention that contributors will be announced in your newsletter.

A great way to get tips on creating your newsletter is to contact youth in care networks in Canada who have already done it!

The following is a list of the networks who produce their own newsletter or zines throughout the year. For addresses and other contact information on these networks, please refer to Contact List in this manual.

The Federation of B.C. Youth In Care Networks

Manitoba Youth In Care Network

Alberta Youth In Care and Custody Network

Youth Connections Across Ontario

C.A.S.T. (Children's Aid Society Teens) (Bilingual)

National Youth In Care Network

The Halifax Youth In Care Network

Prescott-Russell Youth In Care Network (Bilingual)

An example of an old NYICN newsletter is included to give you an idea of what we mean...happy writing!!!

"Every time I had to move to a new home, I always lost stuff. I never had a real suitcase of my own and my bags weren't big enough to pack everything, so I'd shove them into a garbage bag. Really, I was living out of a garbage bag."

A youth in care participant of the NYICN's "Network Buffet Conference"

The Luggage Drive

It was at the Network Buffet conference that the participants unanimously agreed that all youth in care should be entitled to their own suitcases or bags while in care and when they are ready to leave care.

The Sussex Youth In Care Network in New Brunswick was the first to tackle this project and with great success! The following are some step-by-step tips from their experiences.

What is it?

The Luggage Drive is a project run by and for youth in care to help themselves and each other to find donated pieces of luggage.

Why?

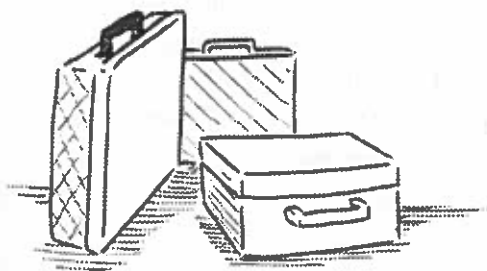
Most social service agencies do not have the budget to purchase brand new luggage for each and every young person in their care. Usually they are more concerned with immediate needs like food, shelter, clothing and education.

As a result, most youth in care lose their belongings when they have to move to a new foster home, group home, institution, or when they 'graduate' from care. As mentioned earlier, most of us deal with this by shoving our things into garbage bags. This gives off a message that we are different and causes humiliation.

How?

Get your network together for a meeting with the Luggage Drive on the agenda. If you don't have a group that meets on a regular basis, talk to the other youth in care that you know. Talk to your social worker about your idea. Attend a foster parent meeting and ask them how many of their youth have their own suitcases. These meetings and questions will spark conversation and great ideas. Some of these people may already know a really good way to either raise the funds or donations. If not, BRAINSTORM as a group to come up with a plan. Here are some ideas to get you started...

- 1.) Send out a memo to all social workers, directors and foster parents asking them to look in their attics, basements, garages and closets for their old or unused suitcases or duffel bags. Let them know that you are holding a Luggage Drive for youth in care on a confirmed date. Let them know where this will be and, if your group can afford it, that refreshments will be provided. You might also want to hold a raffle or a bake sale during the Drive to raise some cash for the network.
- 2.) Involve the community! Make up some flyers advertising the need, the event, time and place. Add a contact number in case people would like to help out but can't make it on that particular day. Get a few volunteers together who can offer a few hours to drop the flyers in mailboxes, at grocery stores, local businesses, etc.



- 3.) Ask your local or community newspaper to do a write-up or donate the advertising space that will tell readers about your network and what you're doing.
- 4.) Write a donation request to department stores or chains that sell luggage items. You can find an example of a donation letter in the Fundraising chapter. Steps 1 – 3 will probably help you enough so that you won't even need to write the donation letter. In case you decide to write in anyway,
 - Have someone look over it or edit it for you.
 - Make sure you have the correct address for the recipient of the letter.
 - Remember to add your name, name of your network and information on how to reach you (i.e. phone number, email address, etc.).
 - If your network has charitable status, offer a charitable receipt in return for the luggage donation. If you don't have charitable status, request that your local social service or child welfare agency offer this (see fundraising chapter for more information).
 - Mail and fax your letter to the contact person. This way, you know for sure that they received it.

And it's that simple...

Good luck!!!



Welcoming Project

The Welcoming Project for Youth In Care was established by a former youth in care in Prince George, BC, who saw the need to "welcome" other children and youth into care. This was done by distributing packages to these youth that contained welcoming, informative, hygienic, fun items, and would include age and language appropriate info about the child advocate and the rights and responsibilities of youth in care.

When a child or youth first comes into care, they are taken from the only home they have ever known, are placed with a group of strangers and are usually unaware of their rights as a human being or the additional rights as youth in care. Most are scared and feel abandoned and don't know where their direction lies.

When children come into care, most of the time it's done very quickly with the protection or immediate safety of the child as the main concern. But, some children and youth don't know why they had to come into care in the first place as this was not explained to them very well or at all — whereas others know all too well. Giving a Welcoming Package (or kit) to children and youth may help make things easier by addressing the following issues:

- Leaving home with only the clothes on your back.

- Knowing they weren't the only ones who were taken from their homes. This sends a clear and helpful message that "you're not alone".
- Having a chance to learn about the Rights of youth in care and knowing that care won't be as bad as home was.
- Having a container which they will be able to store some of the small items they manage to take with them, when it's time to move to either another home or out on their own. (Refer to the Luggage Drive project for more information.)

HOW TO START A WELCOMING PROJECT FOR YOUTH IN CARE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Once you see the need for a project in your community, some important things to establish are:

- 1.) Your vision (See Boards and Committees for tips on mission/vision statements.)
- 3.) Elders and organizations in your community (See Adult Support.)
- 4.) Possible places to search for funding or things "in-kind" (Refer to Fundraising for more information.)
- 4.) A budget
- 5.) Long and short term goals for the Welcoming Project
- 6.) A proposal. (See Fundraising for examples of budgets, goals and proposals.)

RIGHTS, RESOURCES, ISSUES AND INFO

To help keep the interest of the youth, the Welcoming Project team decided against simply stating the rights that youth have while in care in favour of a method that was fun and approachable – a funky pocket resource book, which lists youth-friendly resources in Prince George.

In each of the packages, the project team included informational handouts on STD's (for youth between 13 – 18 years old), Dieting, Rights for Youth In Care, Youth in Care Issues, and "Help and Advice". Fun things they added were: mini playing cards, crossword puzzles, paper and crayons for younger age groups, hacky sacks, address books, key chains, and most importantly, a stuffed teddy bear! Hygiene items they added were: shampoo, bar of soap, tooth brush, tooth paste, deodorant, pads (female youth group 12 – 18), condoms (youth group 12 – 18).

The packages also included handouts with information on individual team members, explaining what it was like for them to be in care, using both positive and negative views (but nothing that will terrify the young person). The team felt that this was important, so that the youth reading their package handout gets to know who they are and makes it easier for them to relate to each other.

Remember that when you are writing your proposal to include the cost of packages to your budget. The "fun things" and even some hygiene items like soap, shampoo, conditioner and deodorant can be purchased at the Dollar

Store. Condoms are usually donated at Needle Exchange Programs and sexual health clinics or can be purchased at your local drug store or pharmacy.

A key thing to remember is to make sure all of the packages contain materials and supplies that are AGE APPROPRIATE and won't be harmful in any way to the child or youth receiving the package.

To ensure this safety, the project team took the 3 – 6 year old package to the Early Childhood Education program at the local College and asked the staff to make comments and suggestions of what was appropriate and what could be changed to improve it.

Distribution

The packages were meant to be distributed to all youth in care in Prince George, whether they were permanent or temporary wards. Their first distributions were done by hosting a pizza night at one of the group homes. They invited different homes to meet with them and showed them a provincial rights video and basically, hung out.

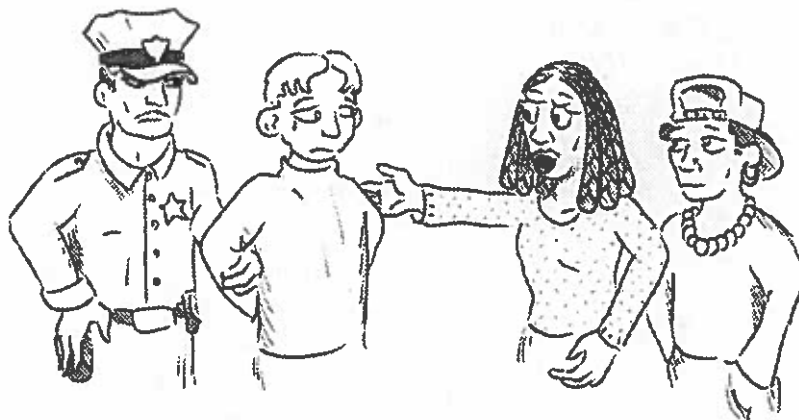
The project team also worked out a system for mailing out packages through the Ministry for Children and Families offices. This would ensure that all youth and children entering care would receive a package. The project workers went out on regular visits to group homes and foster homes to distribute packages to the staff at these facilities. This is a great idea because it provides the opportunity to explain things like rights and answer any questions that the residents might have.

The benefits of distributing packages through presentations and workshops:

- Encourages participation from everyone,
- Promotes self advocacy,
- Promotes the Welcoming Project,
- Invites feedback from youth and adults on how the project could be improved.

The Welcoming Project has spread to different regions of British Columbia. In addition, other provinces across Canada have begun developing their own versions of the project.

The Welcoming Project in Prince George continues to provide support, peer advocacy and welcoming packages to all youth in care. The project continues to be run by paid staff, all youth from care.



Working with Young Offenders

INTRODUCTION: Roots of Passion

My name is Teresa Lum. I am 25 years old and I grew up in government care since I was about 11. When I was asked to write this, I got very nervous. I have a hard time writing at the best of times, and the thought of writing about something so important, left me wondering if I could do the subject justice. I hope my passion will get me through it, and leave you as a reader, with an understanding of how much networking has changed my life....AND the lives of many others.

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS:

- Introduction: Roots Of Passion
- The Seed Is Planted! Introduction To The Custody Center: How We Got In
- Laying The Fertilizer
- Watering The Seedlings: In The Door
- Roots Take Grip: First Tour
- A Few Tangles: Obstacles
- Breaking Ground
- Back To The Network – Debriefing Time
- Safety For Yourself And The Young Person
- Nothing But Good Stuff Here
- Playing The Hero: Some Personal Boundary Lessons
- Training, What Training?
- Summary

THE SEED IS PLANTED! INTRODUCTION TO THE CUSTODY CENTER: HOW WE GOT IN

About 3 years ago the Federation of British Columbia Youth In Care Networks (FBCYICN) decided to start reaching out to youth in custody. Before that we focused mainly on what I call "mainstream" youth in care.

As youth in care, it's bad enough that we are constantly fighting the social stigma that labels us as "bad asses", and divides us up into separate categories. It's even sadder to know that amongst ourselves, we have a tendency to further separate ourselves from one another. When introducing ourselves, we have the need to attach what type of Ministry we fall under, what type of addiction we suffer from, and what type of "in care" home we grew up in. We are not unlike those adults who find it necessary to attach their profession to their name when introducing themselves. It gives them status, a false sense of belonging.

LAYING THE FERTILIZER

We wrote a proposal to get into one of the most prominent, and well – known custody centers in British Columbia.

Unfortunately, it was denied. We learned later that it was because it had the word "advocacy" in it. Some of the custody center staff felt these youth already had too many rights, and had exercised too many of them through outlets like the Ombudsman. What did they need peer advocates for?

CRIME RATE AMONG CANADA'S YOUTH

For the past five years, there have been approximately 3,500 to 4,000 youth in custody on any given day. Across Canada, in rural and urban neighbourhoods, the overall youth crime rate is declining. Between 1991 and 1997, the charge rate for young people dropped from 643 to 495 per 10,000 youth in the population – a 23% decrease. The decrease was mostly in property crimes. The rate of young people charged with violent crimes increased over this same period from 81 to 93 per 10,000 youth. However, since peaking in 1995, the charge rate for violent crimes among youth has decreased by 3.2%.

— Department of Justice Canada

WATERING THE SEEDLINGS: IN THE DOOR

We tried again, and this time took out the word "advocacy". A month later we were accepted. On the next page is a copy of the proposal sent to the custody center.

ROOTS TAKE GRIP: FIRST TOUR

On my first tour of the center, the senior correctional officer (SCO) taught us about the different levels of "victimization" (violation of someone's rights and freedoms as a person) in the units and 72 hour segregation. I was informed who the "good staff" were and which staff "needed more training". I was told that residents weren't allowed to have pop cans, McDonald's straws, chip bags, pens, pencils or anything "pokey". Pokey items included things such as earrings, rings, necklaces and shoelaces because "someone could harm themselves or others" with these things.

A FEW TANGLES: OBSTACLES

While touring the unit, I noticed that the males in custody were much more open to our presence than the females. Now, I know what you're thinking..."that's because you're a female!" It wasn't that simple. While the males were either mildly curious or indifferent to our presence, the girls in the center seemed to huddle very close in clusters, and give us what I would politely refer to as "disapproving looks." It was at this point that the SCO and I decided that I should start working with the males first.

So there I was, bright-eyed and bushy tailed (the worst kind) ready to change the world. I was fairly young, had been in care and was a female working in a predominantly male working environment. I was told I couldn't wear shorts, skirts, short-sleeved shirts or low collars.

I remember the pressure from having to remain calm, self-assured, and somewhat competent. I knew staff and residents would test me. Some male staff were rude and obnoxious and some female staff wouldn't give me the time of day. Some residents attempted to get me to smuggle in cigarettes while some just tried to grope me as I walked down the halls.

Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks
#270- 550 Sixth Street, New Westminster, BC
V3L 3B7, Canada
Phone: (604) 527-7762 Fax: (604) 527-7764

March 29th, 1996

Name of Contact Person
Director of Programs
Address

Dear: Name of Contact Person

Re: FBCYICN Peer Counsellors (part-time) on-site at name of
Custody Center

The Federation of British Columbia Youth in Care Networks is an organization run by and for youth in and from government care, between the ages of 14 and 24 years of age. We are a provincial organization working in partnership with government, service providers, the community and the general public to assist youth in developing and utilizing their own voice.

As an institution that deals with target youth, we would like to work in partnership with staff and youth in your facility. Our goals as on-site, part-time, peer counsellors at (Name of Custody Center) are to provide friendship, support, and positive peer counseling to youth in confinement. There are many benefits in granting our peer counsellors access to youth in custody. Not only can we provide support and information to both youth and staff, but we can also offer on-going support and assistance to youth once they return to the community.

For your information, the proposed project could be overseen by name of contact person. There would be two FBCYICN staff members acting as peer counsellors: (names of members).

In closing, we sincerely hope you will allow us space and access to youth in (Custody Center). We look forward to a long standing, working partnership with staff and youth in your facility.
Yours very truly,
FBCYICN

A BIT OF CULTURE

The young offender system has its own unique culture. This culture has a huge impact on the youth who live in it. It takes some youth months or years after leaving jail to get past this way of life. Some never get past it. For youth who try to reintegrate into the real world, every day is a battle. They are torn between two very different worlds and two very different sets of expectations. Understanding what life is like "on the inside" will help you to support them as they make the difficult move back into society.

It would take a whole book to explain life in jail completely. Instead, I've selected a few examples of "rules on the inside" that will help to illustrate the conflict and complexity of life in jail.

- Don't act vulnerable, or you might get a beating.
- Don't act tough, or you might get a beating.
- Just try not to attract attention. But don't make it look like you're trying not to attract attention, or you might get a beating.
- Don't talk. Talking a lot is a good way to get jumped.
- If you kiss up to the guards, the other youth might beat the crap out of you. If you piss off the guards, they'll make your life Hell for as long as you're there. The key is to have minimal interaction with the guards. If you can convince them that you don't exist, you've won the game.
- When in doubt, some act of violence will probably solve your problem.
- Jails are extremely racist places. If you try to interact with youth of another ethnic group you might find yourself getting two beatings: one from the youth of the other ethnic group, one from the youth of your own.
- The only way you'll get privileges, temporary releases, and other goodies is to stay out of trouble. But you have to get in a certain amount of trouble, or it'll look like you're kissing up to the guards. Even though everybody's trying to get privileges, everyone has to act like they're not trying.
- Whatever you do, **DON'T TRUST ANYONE.**

Written by Matthew Geigen-Miller

BREAKING GROUND

One day I was feeling frustrated and decided to try a new approach. I spoke with the SCO about getting hooked up with one of the residents who had done some time, and who held a lot of respect in the center. It was a gamble, but I figured if I could gain his respect then I could begin to work on some other issues.

She agreed to hook me up with a 17yr old resident who had done time since he was 12, and was well-liked in the center. "Bobby" and I hit it off pretty good, and word started to get around the center that I was okay. Within one month, my list of residents waiting to see me doubled! They wanted to discuss why I had been in care, and they couldn't believe that the government actually paid us to get together to help us fix our problems.

TYPES OF CRIMES COMMITTED BY YOUTH

Only a small number of youth are involved in serious and repeat criminal acts, particularly acts of violence. In 1997, 82% of charges laid against youth were for non-violent crimes like theft, drug possession and contempt of court orders. 18% were for violent crimes- a 2% drop from the previous year. Over half of all violent crimes were minor non-sexual assaults: another one quarter were for more serious non-sexual assaults. The majority of charges against youth are for non-violent property offenses. About one-half of these are for theft under \$5,000. In 1997, the rate of youth charged with property crimes declined for the sixth consecutive year. The rate of youth charged with stealing, car theft and break and entry has fallen by as much as 35% since 1991.

— Department of Justice Canada

BACK TO THE NETWORK – DEBRIEFING TIME

After spending time at the center, I was required to report back to my fellow staff members at the FBCYICN and face my co-workers' concerns about what was and wasn't working for them, in terms of Network staffing issues. This proved to be a challenge in itself. Moving from an environment where showing vulnerability is not accepted, to a place where it is can be a valuable way of learning, wasn't always the easiest transition for me to make.

SAFETY FOR YOURSELF AND THE YOUNG PERSON:

WHAT TO FIGURE OUT BEFORE YOU SET FOOT IN THE CENTER

This is a tricky one because there are so many variables. It's important to know yourself well enough to know what your personal comfort level is, and from there, what your boundaries are. This needs to be considered as carefully as the center's comfort level and should be weighed and balanced equally. For example, I made it very clear when I started working at the center that I would not work with sex offenders or violent offenders because I didn't have the capacity to deal with that. On the next page you will find a list of "work rules" and my own set of "personal rules".

WORK PRECAUTIONS (may vary from center to center):

- 1.) Tell staff where in the center you are located.
- 2.) No touching. (This can be difficult if a young person gets upset, and you're not even allowed to give them a hug.)
- 3.) Wear a "buzzer". (A personal alarming device worn on your neck, so that if something happens, you can call in the "goon squad" or safety staff.)
- 4.) No contact after young person is released. (without prior permission)

MY PERSONAL PRECAUTIONS

- 1.) I'll tell staff where I am.
- 2.) I won't read a young person's file. I only want to know what they are comfortable telling me.
- 3.) I'll only wear the buzzer on the first visit, unless I'm not comfortable with a young person for some reason.
- 4.) Without being too overt, I try to sit closest to the exit door. If something happens, I want to be able to leave, and not have to send in the "goon squad".
- 5.) Relax.

WORK RULES ON THE "OUTS" (outside of the center)

- 1.) Have an unlisted phone number.
- 2.) No bringing them home to live.

MY PERSONAL RULES ON THE "OUTS"

- 1.) I will give you trust and respect unless you give me a reason not to. This particular personal rule has gotten me into a bit of trouble and a few lectures. This is an example of a reason why I follow this principle: "Billy Bob" was just released from custody after serving 6 months for grand auto theft and possession of stolen property. I took him out for lunch and had to stop at the bank first. I left him in the car while it was running. My boss called it an "unwise move on my part", but "Billy-Bob" thanked me for trusting him and still remembers 3 years later.

NOTHING BUT GOOD STUFF HERE!

Involving young offenders in networking has its own characteristics, as does involving youth from mental health services, or kids from group homes. Each "type" of youth has different wants and needs, but all youth in/from care share one universal thing in common...they all have the desire to be "normal", and to be accepted for who they are, regardless of their background or label.

Here are my two favorite examples written by two of my friends.

A TRUE SURVIVOR

I have been involved in youth in care networking for about seven years now. I have been very privileged to have pretty well experienced most aspects of networking. I have been involved, nationally, provincially, and locally. I have also had just about every attitude towards networking. I have loved it, hated it and been indifferent to it. When I started networking I was about 18 years old and feeling fairly powerless over my life. More importantly, I thought that the people in charge of my life didn't care about my opinion or me. As I became more involved in networking, these feelings changed to confidence and "importance". I had the opportunity to meet with other youth in care and feel similar things for once. The best feeling I get though is not helping myself, but helping others.

The best thing I've seen through networking is governments change in attitude towards youth in care. Knowing that some of these changes were influenced by my opinion, is a gift I will carry forever. Probably the most personal and valuable asset that networking has given me is a friend back in my life. It's one of those people that I can say I truly have unconditional love for. We met when we were about 10 years old and I believe the attraction came from our bad home situations. She knew I understood the pain, and she understood mine. We were separated at around 12 years old due to changes in our lives. I ended up in the juvenile correctional system doing various stunts and unbeknownst to me so did she. Throughout the years we would meet up for short periods of time, but mostly I was consumed in my drug addiction.

At eighteen I cleaned up and started getting involved in youth in care networking. I hadn't seen or heard from her in about 3 years. I showed up to a conference and there she was. Our relationship hasn't changed much, but our lives have. To this day we are as close as ever. Thanks to networking for bringing back one of the most important people in my life.

BECOMING A SURVIVOR

I am a 19-year-old male youth who is still trying to leave the system. I'm writing this to let you all know how net-working has changed my life forever. In the past 7 years I have been involved with too many government services, (I hate the word "service", it makes it sound like they did me a favor) but the majority has been corrections and drug and alcohol stuff. I always had a hard time understanding how the system works the way it does and still claims to be helping me. Being a "troubled and troubling youth", I constantly rebelled against it.

During my last stay in jail, I was introduced to someone from the Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks. She came to me with ideas of youth helping youth and coming together. She explained strength in numbers and how it creates a voice that the government listens to. The same government I spent most of my life being frustrated with. From a young age, I always asked a lot of questions and stood up for what I thought was right. So naturally, I was sold on the idea. I began to learn more about youth run organizations, networking and positive things that can be done to help other youth. I learnt that there were networks all over the world trying to make a change for kids and most of them have lived in the system, not just read about it.

Since I've been involved with these networks I've learnt so much about the system. Most of the people in power care; it just takes that one idiot in the right place at the right time to screw things up though. I now feel that my voice is heard and that gives me a sense of peace. That's all I've ever wanted the government to do. I now understand (I don't always like it) and accept the decisions made by the government because I know some listen. I've got the best supports I've ever had and I no longer feel alone and forgotten. I have only the network to thank.

PLAYING THE HERO: SOME PERSONAL BOUNDARY LESSONS

Through my work with youth in custody, I've found that the corrections system is one that sets them up for failure. There is little or no planning for young people when they're released, and it's easy to fall into the "hero" role. Here's an example of how the "hero trap" can play out:

Who's Crap Is It?

Two weeks before "John" is released his case planning team decides they better get a plan together. They tell John the date for the planning meeting, and he asks me to attend with him. A couple days before the meeting we talk about what he "wants", what he "needs" and what is "do-able".

The day of the meeting about 11 of us go into a large room with a long table. John is told to sit at the head of the table and everyone else goes to the opposite end. I become a little unnerved because I know the team is already edgy over my presence, but I gulp some air, grab my chair and go sit down by John. There is dead silence, so I introduce myself. The meeting starts with the probation officer reading John's conditions of release. The social worker talks about how she doesn't have a home that will take him. Now I do believe that most of these people including myself, have the best of intentions, but you know what they say; "The road to hell is paved with good intentions". This lasts for about 45 minutes, with no input from John, with the exception of me piping in on occasion on his behalf.

Finally, John gets so frustrated, he stands up and starts yelling at them (not suitable to reprint). He finishes with "I'm leaving with Teresa and you all can go @#\$% yourselves." He looks at me to see if I'm coming and storms out. So now I've done it! I've utterly destroyed any credibility I might have been able to gain with these people by setting it up "John and I" against "them".

And John is mad that I didn't leave with him.

They all sit there and stare at me while I quickly contemplate life at that moment in the room vs. what life would be like driving away in my car. I stay and start blaming them for not including John in the conversation. I quickly realize this approach is not working, so I try a different one. (Learnt in a conflict-resolution course!) I begin by apologizing for blaming them and explain that part of my role is to assist John in articulating his needs. I had taken a very defensive role and I should have asked John to speak instead of speaking on his behalf. I added that part of my role is assisting John back into his community, emphasizing how this could alleviate some of his pressures. I also reminded them that with the exception of the probation officer and the social worker, staff were allowed no contact after John left the center. I, on the other hand, could, and this could prove to be useful.

After talking for a bit, it felt like some resolution had come and we called John back into the room. He got 2 out of the 3 things he wanted, including moving back to his Mom's place where he wanted to be in the first place. He knew I had to report back to the center on how he was doing, and he was okay with that. From that day on, the transition team, myself and the young person (regardless of whether we were in agreement or not), had come to a place of



We were all
caught up in a
power struggle
while forgetting
that we were
dealing with
someones life.



new-found respect and professionalism. One of the biggest things I learned from this experience, was discovering that everyone had tried to play "the hero" role, and tried to prove they had the best answer. We were all caught up in a power struggle while forgetting that we were dealing with someone's life.

I realized that my own personal crap and anger at the system got in the way and the person I was trying the hardest to help, I could have potentially hurt the worst.

TRAINING, WHAT TRAINING??

I didn't have any formal training specific to the custody center when I went in. What I did have was training in community-based programs, a few conflict resolution courses and tons of workshops. I was definitely relying on common sense and experience to get me through. There were a couple things I needed before I went in.

A course in corrections "lingo" and terminology would have been very helpful. I spent a lot of time figuring out the abbreviations on probation orders and trying to decipher the center – specific lingo. Some kids would call 72-hour segregation "the pit" and some just "seg". It took me a bit to figure out that this was the same thing.

The second thing I should have done was to involve more people who were familiar with the custody center and its policies well. I knew that fairly quickly, but trying to find someone who had the time or didn't have a hidden agenda was tough. My work was great for me to de-brief, and keep me on track for the Network, but I needed someone to teach me that sometimes policy is very different than practice...especially in jail!

SUMMARY

As you can tell, the field of youth custody is not an easy one to enter. It takes a lot of drive and determination to carry on in such a challenging, but rewarding field. You need to be open to new experiences, and head straight-on into situations with humor and fearlessness fueled by passion. For it takes passion to challenge a system set up to fail those who need it the most.

Though I still have difficulty keeping my patience with youth who keep repeating the same tired mistakes, I have to remind myself of where they've come from, and about the system that is waiting for them on the outside.

In my view, it is the system that sets youth up for failure. They're coming out of the system with no new tools to handle life's challenges any differently than they did before entering the system; it's not a surprise that they re-enter society to "re-offend" once again...to the very society's "rules" that failed them in the first place.

I believe that the Network is an empowering alternative, where youth with no tools to lead healthy lives can learn from one another, from those who have walked the same path.

Public Speaking

THE FEAR OF PUBLIC SPEAKING

For many – if not most of us – speaking in public can be frightening. Some people have struggled to overcome this fear while others have turned on their heels and ran for the nearest exit. Some of us have learned through trial and error that it's important for the speaker to have fun with the audience when he/she is presenting. He or she may also discover that audiences usually ask smart questions and will expect intelligent, researched responses. Audiences will usually be very appreciative of your time, and usually, they don't throw tomatoes or throw you off of the stage.

Youth in care networks can provide an excellent opportunity for youth to speak on behalf of their peers at conferences, media events, meetings, panels or in Speak Outs.

The NYICN would like to credit the *Getting Your Message Out* manual produced by the Community Action on Violence Against Women – YWCA of Canada for adding some great tips to this chapter!

PRESENTATION CHECKLIST

Before preparing your presentation, here is a checklist to keep on-hand...

- How casual or formal will this meeting or presentation be? Are you talking to business people, government officials, my peers, the larger community? Depending on the group, a certain type of clothing or speech may be required.
- Are there other speakers? What will they talk about? You may want to show how your topic relates to the event.
- How much time will you have to speak? If there are other speakers, are they likely to agree or disagree with you? Are there any controversial issues, or are your opinions in any way in conflict with the other speakers? Will you have a chance to respond to them?

When you have all this information, you can begin preparing your presentation.

LENGTH OF YOUR SPEECH

The length of your speech or presentation will depend on several factors:

- the occasion of the speech,
- whether or not yours is the only event on the agenda,
- whether you are part of a panel presentation.


We all know from painful experience that the biggest problem with speech-makers is they go on far too long – even when they've been requested to speak for a specified time. Also, most people go on much longer than they plan to, which is why it is important to rehearse.

You must also allow the right amount of time after your speech for a question period that doesn't rush people or cut them off.

Follow the advice of the group you are giving the speech for, and heed these time guidelines

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS:

- The Fear of Public Speaking
- Presentation Check-List
- Length of Your Speech
- Preparing Your Presentation
- Presenting Your Speech – Dealing with The Jitters
- How to Handle Questions
- Evaluation and Follow-up



...it helps the audience to relate the issue to their own lives. It helps them to think about the issue on a different level.



When your speech is the main event of the meeting:

- Between 25 – 40 minutes – but not more!

When you're one of the several speakers on a panel:

- You will be guided by the meeting organizers, but it's usually not more than 10 minutes for your presentation.

When you are a Keynote Speaker at a conference:

- Always ask what length is wanted – 20 minutes is usually about right.

When you speak from the floor at a meeting:

- Follow the rules that have been established. People get annoyed – and will not listen to your message – if you take up too much time from the floor.

Prepare what you are going to say, keep your opening short and get to your points or questions as soon as possible. Also make sure you stick to the theme of the event.

PREPARING YOUR PRESENTATION...

A speech is made up of three parts: the introduction, the body, and the conclusion. As a basic rule of thumb, the introduction should be about two minutes, the conclusion should be about two minutes, with the rest of the time divided into segments of about equal length and time.

The introduction:

Every speech needs an interesting beginning – a kind of “hook” to catch the audience's attention.

If you are going to speak about how the community can further support youth in care, you might begin with a question like this one:

“Imagine how you might feel if one day, you lost your job or suffered a terrible accident and could no longer care for your children. Who would look after them? Imagine if you had no family members or if the courts were not confident that your family could provide proper care for your children? What if your children were placed into a group home or foster home? What if they were split up and rarely saw you or each other? Could you honestly say that your children's needs were being met or that the care they received is as good as what you would offer?”

This type of opener can work to your advantage as it helps the audience to relate the issue to their own lives. It helps them to think about the issue on a different level. These two things alone, will help them to truly care about what you have to say.

The body:

You will need...

- at least two good points, and no more than three, depending on the length. Why three? Any more than this may blur your main point.
- Your second most important point in the speech is best made during the opening and your most important point is best made at the end.



There are several
books that you can
refer to that were
written by some of
your peers who were
in care such as:
*Into the Hands of
Youth, Pain, Lots of
Pain, and To be on
our own.*



- a good speech needs a point of view – and who better to give it than you?

After you have their attention, it's very important to back up your statements with some FACTS. This is where research is essential. Although you are one of the best people to talk to about the care system, we must remember that your audience will want documented facts that no doubt come from their peers – the adults who work in the system.

Types of facts to add in your presentations:

- Your own personal experience
- The experience of your peers (with permission from those you quote)
- Statistics on youth in care related topics like housing, post secondary education, healing from abuse, leaving care and independent living, crime, clothing allowance...the list goes on.

Videos produced by the NYICN like "Gambling with our lives" and "Coast to Coast – A Nation of Youth United" are excellent tools at presentations. You can call the NYICN at 1-800-790-7074 to get these.

Another research tip is to talk to those who work in the system. Ask for things like annual reports that can give you some facts on how children in care in your region are doing. Talk to the director of Children's Aid or your MLA, MNA or MPP. Call Statistics Canada (1-800-263-1136) or the Child Welfare League of Canada (613-235-4412), both of which will have statistics on child welfare and youth issues. Get as many facts as possible to back up your points.

Accentuating the positive and the negative. We are all aware that the system is not perfect. Many changes need to be made to the Child Welfare Systems of every province across this country. But, there are programs and care givers going above and beyond the call of duty. It's often good to highlight this in your presentation. Basically, you are sharing "best practices" with your audience to show how change can happen.

Talk about your network and what it is doing to help young people in care. Give examples of services that your network offers or examples from other provinces. This can spark the interest of future supporters and show how youth are working to do things for themselves. Which takes us to our next point.

Your talk should inspire people to take action. Tell them how to get involved with the organization or the issue you're talking about.

Your conclusion:

In the conclusion, restate each of the points you made. Refer back to the question you raised in the introduction. Have a powerful ending. An excellent quote that ties together what you've been trying to say is a great idea. But make sure it is appropriate. Look for a fresh, even previously unquoted and unsung person to quote. Although there are many books full of quotes, try using one from a youth in care on the topic you are talking about. This can have a powerful effect, especially if it is up on an overhead projector as you speak.

A WORD ABOUT WISECRACKING!

Unless you're sure (that is, others have told you) that you can tell a good joke or an amusing anecdote that is both tasteful and relevant to the audience, it's probably wise to stay away from trying to be funny. Just be your good-humored self.

Avoid stereotypes in any examples you use. If you're not sure if something might be offensive, don't use it. Ask people who would know, if you're not sure what is or isn't appropriate.

MORE TIPS...

- Time your speech. Practice your speech out loud – maybe in front of someone you're comfortable with. Don't guess that the length is about right. Practice reading it slowly and time it. If it's too long, start cutting.
- Be prepared to make changes in your speech. If your time is cut short, you'll want to know which parts can be left out or covered more quickly.
- Make a note to yourself that before taking questions you may want to thank people – the organizers, if you are speaking at a meeting outside your own group, and the audience. Have people's names written down. Learn how to pronounce them beforehand.
- If you don't know who your audience is going to be in terms of how much they know about your issue, here's a suggestion... You don't want to assume everyone in the audience has the background information they need – nor do you want to insult them by being too simplistic. One technique is to say something like this:

"Some of you have a lot of experience in this area, but I will give everyone the basics so that you all know where I am starting from."

PRESENTING A SPEECH OR, HOW TO DEAL WITH THE JITTERS!

1. Have a prepared speech that you have practiced, practiced, and practiced, as well as timed. When you know your speech well, you can look up often and sound more natural. You won't be so nervous if you lose your place. Reading a speech is boring and can turn off the audience.
2. Allow plenty of time to get to the presentation venue so you don't arrive late or at the last minute. Allow time to talk to the organizers and guests for 10 to 15 minutes and time for the bathroom.
3. Introduce yourself and say why you are there. How much you say depends on how you were described in the advertising for the event or how you are introduced at the meeting.
4. Let the audience know how you will handle questions. Speakers sometimes say, "You can ask me questions anytime", but it's probably best to ask people to wait until you finish. You might answer the question in your talk.
5. Make sure everyone can hear you. Don't begin until they can.
6. Act confident, even if you really aren't. It helps the audience to relax and trust what you are saying.
7. Put a watch on the podium or table to keep you aware of the time. This avoids having to look at your wrist.
8. Don't read directly from your notes, unless you're quoting statistics or facts.
9. If you have a podium in front of you, it's okay to use full pages of paper for your speech. Otherwise, small index cards are best.
10. Experienced speakers often like to write their speech in point form on index cards to help them remember their key points. If you lose your way (it even happens to the pros), then you'll jog your memory by the seeing the heading for the point you want to make. Number index cards in case they fall!
11. If you must write the whole speech out, use capital letters or large fonts and double-space it.
12. Try not to eat a heavy meal or drink fizzy drinks beforehand.
13. Be aware of your body language. Use good posture. Keep your hands out of your pockets. Don't pull at your hair, nose, collar, glasses, etc. Don't rattle paper, fidget, or rock from side to side.
14. RELAX. Breathe slowly from the abdomen. Feel the ground beneath your feet. Look out – and around – at the audience. Smile. Breathe slowly.
15. Try to avoid telling people that you are nervous – it just makes the audience nervous too. If your presentation is at a Speak Out or less formal setting, telling your audience that you are a little nervous can actually help develop a rapport – especially if you're presenting to your peers. Try not to laugh nervously, if you can help it.
16. Get your message out with energy and enthusiasm.
17. Keep breathing – slowly!



Know what
your message is
in any speech
you give.



REMEMBER!

Know what your message is in any speech you give. What do you and your network hope to get from the speech? If you only had a couple of minutes to get your message across, what would you say?

HOW TO HANDLE QUESTIONS

Even the best presentations can lose their power if you falter during the question and answer period. The following points will help you avoid pitfalls:

- The Q & A is an important part of public speaking. It should be well-planned. If your issue is controversial, some members of the audience may be hostile.
- Be prepared with a few questions of your own to ask the audience in case some aren't forthcoming right away. For example, if you've talked about violence in the media, you could ask which TV programs they find offensive and why.
- If you don't know the answer, be honest. Say you don't know and offer to find out. But be careful. If you promise to contact someone later, keep your promise!
- For a large or noisy audience, or a hard-to-hear question, repeat the question before you answer it. People don't like to hear an answer and not know the question.
- Keep your answers short and clear. Don't repeat details from your talk.
- If someone asks a long question, jot down notes as they speak and try to answer it in parts, e.g., "I think there are three parts to your question. First I will answer your point that..."
- Some questions may be off topic or may get too detailed about a particular situation. When that happens, you can say that they will be answered after the meeting.
- Don't get angry if you don't like the question or feel offended by it – unless it's for good reason. Instead, be clear and assertive about what offended you. Speak with a calm and reasonable voice.
- A good way to deal with anger from a member of the audience is to respect it. Make the person feel she or he has been heard. You might say "I see that you have strong feelings about this. I think that I get your point, although I have a different understanding of the subject."
- Trouble-makers disturb the rest of the audience as well as you. Usually, people want them to be quiet. Remember that you are in charge. The audience as a whole is on your side. If a person remains troublesome, it's the organizers job to handle it. If they don't, stop and ask someone to do it.
- Never repeat hostile or emotional language. If you replay a negative question, you run the risk of having the media quote you as if the words were your own.

- Remain alert during this period. It's risky to let your guard down, even after the first few questions.
- Don't extend your answers in an attempt to avoid questions. The audience is certain to spot your ploy and resent it. Not only that, but if you're in trouble on an answer the more you say, the worse it will likely get.
- Never wrap up a Q & A with an answer you aren't impressed or satisfied with. Leave your audience with a positive impression.
- When you're prepared to close your Q & A period, do not say: "This will be our last question." Say, "We have a few minutes left. May I take another question?" If you aren't satisfied with the question or response, take one more.
- Until you get more experience, don't take on a speech that you know will put you in the hot seat.
- Audiences are always forgiving. Congratulate yourself for taking this on. Tell yourself how well you are doing and how much you are learning.
- Believe that people want to hear your message. If you believe in what you say, and say it with conviction and excitement, people will listen to your message. Go for it!

EVALUATION AND FOLLOW-UP

Find out what your audience thought about your presentation. If written comments were collected, ask to see them. You may want to prepare your own sheets and ask that they be passed out at the end of your presentation or left in a designated spot where people can fill them out and leave them for you. Read them over carefully and take the comments with a grain of salt, whether they seem negative or glowing and learn from them.

