

Adolescents in Foster Care and Emotional Resiliency (3-hour)

Training created by Lisa Dickson and approved in 2009.

Learning Description:

Regardless of where young people are placed in the child welfare system, they need to develop boundaries, emotional health, and the skills to build lifelong relationships. There are specific tools that can help young people overcome the trauma of their pasts and navigate adult relationships.

This workshop has been designed to incorporate the insights of foster care alumni throughout the nation to equip professionals to facilitate the emotional development of youth in care. It includes national research on foster care alumni and post-traumatic stress disorder. Participants will leave with concrete tools to support adolescents in foster care with the development of personal boundaries and the skills to build trusting, restorative relationships.

Learning Outcomes: Participants will:

- Reexamine case file language, how it relates to adolescent brain development and how foster care youth often experience magnified consequences for their behavior.
- Gain awareness about the high rate of PTSD experienced by former foster children and review an overview of symptoms associated with PTSD.
- Provide tools to illustrate boundaries and to map out a circle of supportive relationships for teenagers in foster care.
- Gain insights into the benefits and methods of involving adolescents in foster care as active agents in the healing process.

Diversity Issues Addressed:

Culture of Foster Care: Youth in and from foster care are connected by a common culture cultivated by shared experiences.

Handouts:

- Tool for note taking
- Circle of Support handout
- Boundaries diagram

Agenda:

- 1.) Introduction, Overview
- 2.) Behavior In Its Context
- 3.) Trauma, Survivor Behavior and PTSD
- 4.) Network of Emotional Support for Adolescents
- 5.) Strategies for Empowering Adolescents As Active Agents in the Healing Process
- 6.) Closing and Evaluation

Training Outline:

1.) Introduction, Overview

- Large Group Activity: Introductions, share one thing they hope to gain by attending this workshop.

2.) Behavior In Its Context

- Content: Overview of culture of foster care and teen brain development.
- Transfer of Learning Activity: Experiential activity on how teenage behavior might be magnified in case file descriptions. Participants are invited to write down an anonymous confession of the worst thing they did as a teenager. They fold it up, and turn it in, and then “diagnose” the behavior on a Flip Chart as a group. Trainer asks attendees: *What understanding did you gain from this exercise?*
- Content: Overview of the culture of foster care and teen brain development.

3.) Trauma, Survivor Behavior and PTSD

- Transfer of Learning Activity: Some of the participants are required to move to another seat, based on Post-It's placed on the back of their chairs. Group discussion about how some people like to sit in the back of the room, others in the front, but that wherever we sit, we like that to be our choice. Discussion about how, if participants were continually forced to change seats, they might stop trying to get to know the person seated next to them. This might look like an “attachment disorder,” but the behavior makes sense within its context.
- Large Group Discussion: The trauma of displacement associated with foster care, and survival behavior commonly exhibited by children.
- Content: Research regarding the high rate of PTSD experienced by former foster children, and an overview of symptoms associated with PTSD.
- Transfer of Learning Activity: Flip Chart: How might the symptoms of PTSD be described in a case file? (*i.e. “freeze response” described as passive opposition, fight-or-flight response translating into AWOL or aggression*).

Break for Participants

4.) Network of Emotional Support for Adolescents

- Content: Overview of Erikson Stage 6: Intimacy vs. Isolation. Discussion of how this applies to young people in and from foster care who are transitioning to adulthood, and their ability to form healthy future relationships.

- Individual Exercise (then report out): Circle of Support diagram. Fill out one copy for self, and one for a young person in foster care. Report out and discuss how the two circles are alike vs. different.
- Content: Family Tree Project, and how it illustrates that, when families break down, relationships often become complex and complicated.
- Transfer of Learning Activity: Participants are invited to share, if they have siblings, the role that they or their siblings played during their childhood.
- Large Group Discussion: Siblings as lifelong relationships, 70% of children in foster care have a sibling who is also in care. In neglectful and abusive families, older siblings often voluntarily take on a quasi-parental role; discuss the strengths and challenges associated with that behavior.

5.) Strategies for Empowering Adolescents As Active Agents in the Healing Process

- Content: Empowering adolescents; concept of youth-defined permanency
- Transfer of Learning Activity: Blindfold activity. Trainer will arrange with one willing participant to go to the back of the room, put on a blindfold, and turn around two times. Trainer will then instruct participants to each give only one instruction, the goal being to help their colleague navigate to the front of the room.
- Large Group Exercise: Boundaries role-plays
- Group Discussion: Social work interviews by nature do not encourage equal sharing. What are other ways that child welfare professionals and caregivers can facilitate adolescents with maintaining healthy personal boundaries, and give them a voice in terms of their future and case plan?
- Content: Grief, Guilt and Gratitude diagram, Taylor Model, and concept of forgiveness vs. reconciliation (*i.e. being able to forgive an abuser, while still remaining separate and safe from future abuse*)

6.) Closing and Evaluation

- *Do participants have any additional questions?*
- *What is one thing that you learned today that you plan to put into practice?*
- *What's one concept that you plan to share with a co-worker or fellow foster parent?*