

# MANITOBA OMBUDSMAN



**In Their Own Words**



*An Appreciative Inquiry into the  
Experiences of Youth in Foster Care*

April 2009

I would like to extend my gratitude to the many people who supported this project. First and foremost, thank you to all the young people who agreed to share their stories with me. I enjoyed meeting each and every one of you and look forward to hearing about your contributions in the future. I would also like to thank all the social workers that I connected with who took the time to support the project, and the CEO's of the four Authorities for agreeing to support a Masters in Social Work graduate student, by allowing me to meet and hear the stories of the young people for whom you are responsible.

Thank you also to my academic advisor, Jay Rodgers, who was encouraging and supportive of all my academic endeavours. A special thank you goes to the Office of the Manitoba Ombudsman - specifically Irene Hamilton, Ombudsman, and Cheryl Ritlbauer who agreed to assume the responsibility of a graduate student and then went above and beyond to support this project.

Audra Taylor, Social Work graduate student

# In Their Own Words



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This report is about an Appreciative Inquiry into the experiences of young people in foster care. Twenty youth were interviewed and shared their experiences with the interviewer.

The purpose of the Appreciative Inquiry was twofold: The Ombudsman was examining the impact of the recommendations from her "Strengthen the Commitment" system review.

A Graduate student from the University of Manitoba Social Work program wanted to do her final project in child welfare.

Together they agreed on this project and developed the study.

The goal of the project was

to interview twenty youth, aged fourteen to seventeen (or older, if the individual had recently 'aged out' of foster care) in foster care in Manitoba who were willing to reflect on their experiences in care.

The four Child Welfare Authorities were approached about the project and all agreed to participate. They agreed to provide contact information for young people who agreed to be interviewed.

Young people were approached by their workers, and invited to participate in the project. Only those who wished to participate were interviewed.

Nine communities were visited during the course of

the study - Brandon, Cross Lake, Lorette, Norway House, Opaskwayak, Portage La Prairie, St Pierre Jolys, Thompson, Winnipeg and Woodlands.

Each participant was asked some demographic questions and then nine questions about their particular experiences in foster care.

Some questions were borrowed from a Washington State Appreciative Inquiry into foster care, and others were developed here to respond to some of the issues particular to the province of Manitoba.

The project began in September of 2008 and interviews started in early December.

## The Appreciative Inquiry and the Manitoba Ombudsman

It is through the Ombudsman's Office that this project had its genesis. It can be a challenge to examine the dominant ideology in a large system. Asking questions in a different way can be conducive to facilitating change.

Talking to youth who have experiences in foster care helps us gain a valuable and worthwhile perspective. These young people are the experts in their own experiences. Their values,

opinions and ideas are integral to the system and need to be heard. These youth *are* the study. Their words are the basis of the study results.

Youth of today need to be invited to participate in and be engaged in any discussion that involves them. The young people interviewed for this project do not want 'pie in the sky' - they want to feel good about themselves; normal, accepted and proud of their many

accomplishments. They want to be lauded in their activities and have their dreams accepted. They want more contacts with their social workers and more control over their lives.

These individuals want someone to simply care for and about them, in the most basic of ways - cooking a meal, helping with homework, making sure they get where they are supposed to be and included as a member of a family.

# Demographic Information



There were a few general demographic questions asked before the Appreciative Inquiry process began. The questions related to the number of homes youth had been, their contact method with their worker, and the first age of contact with the child welfare system.

## Age of participants

Age	# of participants
15	4
16	6
17	3
18	4
19	2
19+	1

## Number of foster home placements, per youth

# of homes	# of youth
1-3	8
4-7	7
8-11	1
12-15	1
16-18	0
19+	3

These numbers reflect the number of placements that the youth remembered. These numbers only include foster home placements, not group homes, hotel stays, treatment facilities, emergency shelters or short term temporary homes.

## Age of initial contact with the child welfare system

Birth to 3	4
4-7	8
8-11	4
12-15	4

It is important to note that this is based on recollection—no file reviews were conducted for this study. In addition, there may have been contact before the children understood what that was.

## Gender of participants

Male	12
Female	8

# About Appreciative Inquiry

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This study was designed using the principles of Appreciative Inquiry. This means that language is used that encourages youth to consider their individual experiences from a different perspective. The language is also used to encourage youth to share their positive and important experiences with the interviewer. The study was designed to include 20 youth from a number of different communities and agencies so that adequate representation (geographically and culturally) was assured.

Appreciative Inquiry is a method of research that

- is qualitative,
- takes time to really talk to people about their experiences,
- attempts to understand the details of how and why a particular experience was positive and meaningful,
- gets to the underlying reason of why a given experience was meaningful,
- attempts to find what is successful so it can be understood and reproduced,
- is a flexible approach that allows for and encourages probing questions that are not the same in each interview, and
- proposes a paradigm shift in thinking about the context of the world around us.

This research method uses the opportunity to uncover positive aspects of an experience that may have previously remained unearthed. Appreciative Inquiry takes the personal stories of success or positive experiences and develops them as a role model for future success.

It uses the individual stories and narratives of individuals to create positive goals to work towards. The underlying assumptions here are that people want to make positive changes and that individuals have some control over their own behavior and can choose to make differences in their life. The narratives generated by this process are very powerful.

This methodology is well grounded in the literature and has been used with some fascinating results. See the Appreciative Inquiry website, <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/>, for more information or as a starting point for research on Appreciative Inquiry.



## Why use Appreciative Inquiry?

In Manitoba, like in many provinces, there have been reports of many significant problems in the child welfare system in general, and in the foster care system in particular.

These problems are serious and have attracted the attention of the general public and the media. In 2006, the Manitoba Ombudsman became involved in a review of the opening, closing and transferring of files within the child welfare system.

The report titled "Strengthen the Commitment" and the follow up report for November 2006-March 31/2008 can be found at

<http://www.ombudsman.mb.ca/oreports.htm>.

A notable omission in virtually any analysis of the Manitoba child welfare system is an examination of what is working well already. Appreciative Inquiry is an effective, straightforward, yet in-depth opportunity to find out what the positive experiences of some youth in foster care have been today.

Learning what is working can help us focus our attention on those specific areas. The information in the report can also be used by foster families for ideas on specific things they can do to bond with and help their foster children.

The risk in not examining the system for all of its positive and negative aspects lies in the

possibility of eliminating programs or policies that are impacting positively on the lives of our province's children.

How do we accomplish the goal of learning what is working?

By doing several things:

- Talking personally with the youth.
- Questioning them about what worked in their foster care experiences.
- Inquiring into the concepts of belonging and being cared for, among others.
- Asking youth to share what they think is important about their experiences.

This information is then analyzed. With the information gathered, we can illustrate what is effective within the system in order to build on success. Armed with knowledge about particular components which are working well, the Department of Family Services and Housing, the Authorities, the Agencies and foster parents can focus attention on strengthening the successful areas and magnifying the most beneficial aspects.

While it is certainly true the child welfare system needs change, it is also accurate to say there are many programs, supports and individuals that are providing a commendable service and producing real and meaningful positive changes for families, children and youth.

The information in this report will hopefully lead to supportive reinforcement of what is effective within the system.

It also can provide some information about what needs work and what needs to change.

The questions in the study were a combination of questions from a similar study done in the United States and questions that were designed to inquire about some unique Manitoba concerns. This study is loosely modeled after the American Ombudsman study. (For more information regarding the Washington Appreciative Inquiry see <http://www.governor.wa.gov/ofco/>).

Each interview took about an hour and a half, although some were much longer and a few were shorter. Most youth enjoyed the interview and were especially interested in contributing to positive change in the system.

They generally did not have a hard time thinking of experiences that were positive and enjoyable, and many had fascinating stories to share.

Many thanked the interviewer for the opportunity to share their experiences - both positive and negative.

The interviews took place wherever participants wished to meet - at a restaurant, at their homes, at a coffee shop or an office.

# Themes of the Interviews



There are nine main questions, four demographic questions and seven themes which emerged from the data.

When the youth were interviewed, they had a lot to say. Each participant was offered the chance to speak for as long as they wished and the responses were transcribed.

The results were then analyzed and grouped so that concepts could emerge from the data. Each young person consented to being quoted in the report, and thus, many of their actual words are included in the report.

Questions were asked to inquire about certain experiences and are reflected in the themes as follows:

## Theme One

General feelings about foster care as experienced by youth.

### Question #1

During your time in foster care, you have probably had some better times and some tougher times. For now, I'd like you to remember one of the really good times you've had. It might be a particularly good day or week, or any time when things were going really well for you. Or it might be a great talk you had with someone; or any time you remember as being really special - a time when you felt really good and happy.

## Theme Two

Acceptance, belonging and feeling cared for and about:

### Question #2, #3, #4

Think about a time while you've been in foster care when you felt really taken care of by an adult. This could have been a time when someone was really kind or caring or a time when someone listened to you or helped you get what you wanted.

Think about a time while you've been in foster care when you felt really taken care of by an adult, who just seemed to understand what you wanted or needed without you even asking.

This next question is an important question for most people and you may need a moment to think about it. It can be a great feeling to be accepted, included in things. Think of a time during your foster care experience when you felt a part of things. This could be a person who made you feel accepted or a part of a group where you felt included.

## Theme Three

Family activities and roles; what makes a foster family a good home; what sort of activities make a family your own family?

### Question #5

I would like to know of a time when you were with your foster family and you had some fun. I would like to know what you did that was fun, and what made it fun.



## Theme Four

This theme asks the young person being interviewed to share an experience of personal achievement. Developing your own strengths and gifts can be empowering.

### Question #6

Now I'd like you to think for a moment about your own strengths and gifts. Specifically, I'd like you to remember a time that you went after something that you wanted. It might have been something big or something quite small. Anyway, there was something that you realized that was important to you, and you said to yourself, "Go for it" and, as a result, you made something good happen for yourself.

## Theme seven

Is an opportunity for youth in foster care to tell those adults who read this report what they feel is important and what adults should know.

### Question #9

There are lots of adults out there that spend a lot of time trying to help you feel safe and secure. Is there anything you would like them to know? What can those who really care and want to make a difference in your life (and for other children in foster care) do to help children in foster care?

## Theme Five

A question about parenting and what strengths foster parents share with them is next. This question was intended to elicit stories about parenting skills that are reproducible for all parents.

### Question #7

I think you have some really important things to say. I would like to know about the foster parents you had and their way of caring for you. What kinds of things did they do that you thought were really good - maybe supportive or helpful to you in some way?

## Theme Six

The magic wand question is designed to get a sense from the individuals being interviewed about what they would dream for and change, if they could.

This is a specific component of Appreciative Inquiry and can also be used to find out the problems in a system, based on what the individuals would like to see changed.

### Question #8

Imagine that you had a magic wand and could make anything happen. What three wishes would you have that, starting right now, would make the rest of your time in foster care or the foster care experience for someone else, the best experience you can imagine?



# Overall experiences in foster care



This section asks the young person to share a story about a positive experience they have had in a foster family.

The question was deliberately quite open-ended. We wanted to hear what these young people would consider important.

The question relates to a general time when they were feeling good.

Several youth specifically credited the foster care system for providing for them and being there to step in to care for them, when their own parents or family could not do so. One thanked the system for providing him with so many opportunities that he would not have had otherwise.

Several said how glad they were that the foster care system was there to help them when they needed it.

Many of the youth identified 'traditional Western Cultural' events as special family events which were personally meaningful.

'Traditional' family get-together times like Christmas, Thanksgiving, and birthdays that were celebrated by being together, sharing a meal and having extended family come to visit were especially significant for many youth. The traditional

family event remains a way to spend quality family time together, whether in a biological family or a foster family.

**"I am really happy I went into foster care and I was really happy to be raised out in the country. I knew from when I first got there that I was safe and that I would be taken care of. I had clothes, food and they (foster parents) were really nice to me."**

Here is some of what young people said about their experiences.

"For my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, all my family, I mean my family and my foster

parents' family came and I've never had this many people show up to a party for me before".

One time that felt really good was when we went to the lake and we were all together and we would just hang out all together, it just feels like a normal family thing to do. Sometimes we go bike riding or walking or to the beach or I would watch a movie with my little sister".

Some youth spoke of wonderful experiences they had living in a rural community or on a farm.

"I am really happy I went into foster care and I was really happy to be raised out in the country. I knew from when I first got there that I was safe and that I would be taken care of. I had clothes, food and they (foster parents) were really nice to me".

"When I got my horse was a really great time. I take care of him and I can call him my own and I work to help

pay for his upkeep. I got him because I stepped up and showed that I could handle responsibility and maturity".

"I was excited to tell you about this, because I want to tell other people that foster care is a really good thing, I'm glad it happened to me, I was three or four and remember it".

"On school days, my mom helps me get ready for school, she helps me with my lunch and homework, and she just knows what needs to be done and she makes sure it happens".

" My best home was one where I had good communication (with foster mom) and she felt like my real mom, she was loving and understanding and my brother was there too. She helped me to have contact with my biological mom too".

"I got to go to California with my foster mom for a vacation-I've never been anywhere before-and it was great. My foster sister and me and our foster mom and her two kids went. Now I want to travel more!"

"Everything—I get to play hockey, and the other night I had a really great talk with (foster mom), and I realized that I have to grow up. She is easy to talk to and anything I bring up can be discussed, she doesn't take everything I say at face value and she helps me to become a better person".

# Being Cared For



For these young people, feeling cared for was extremely important in their lives. How does one achieve the feeling of being well and lovingly cared for? What do young

people understand about how they are cared for?

Special events took on extra meaning for these youth, as they helped them to feel special, worthwhile and cared for.

Many of the youth said they felt cared for all the time in their homes. They talked about how just basic good caring parenting was special. Things like clean clothes, clean homes, (foster) parents helping to organize school things, help with homework and meals prepared by family members and eaten together as a family were things they could take for granted in their foster homes.

The youth had fascinating stories to share and explain. What is meaningful to these foster kids are the same

things that are meaningful to many people. Here are some examples:

**"My (foster) mom makes me supper and sometimes she makes my favorite meal, she makes sure I have my lunch for school and I can eat whenever I want to. My (foster) mom talks to me and is always there when I want to talk to her."**

One young man said he felt cared for "because his (foster) mom made him feel as if I am here for a reason, that's what makes me feel as if I am being taken care of".

"They are just supportive of me and what I want to do" and "they always ask me to go out with

them because they want me to come and they just like me".

"I told my (foster) mom about something I wanted and she helped me, just like a mom would, she used her own contacts to help me and I got into this special course because she believed I could do it".

"My (foster) mother makes sure that I am safe, (that I) take my medications, she knows my friends, and she treats me like I'm her daughter and just part of the family".

One youth shared this experience:

"My (foster) mom took me to my mothers' grave on Mothers Day a couple of years ago. She didn't tell me or ask me, she just knew I would want to go and so she made it happen. When we got there she had flowers for me to put on her grave and she gave me time to be alone with my mom and talk to her".

Many mentioned the act of foster

parents knowing or finding out what they liked and *acting* on that knowledge by providing a special snack, meal, outing or activity. This experience made the youth feel worthwhile.

"My (foster) mom makes me supper and sometimes she makes my favorite meal. She makes sure I have my lunch for school and I can eat whenever I want to. My (foster) mom talks to me and is always there when I want to talk to her".

"My worker and my (foster) mom called everywhere to help me get braces. I really needed/wanted them and now I finally have them. My (foster) mom always drives me to all my appointments and everything".

"One of my (foster) families took me shopping and bought me all the things I would need for school, like pants, (not just one pair, but a few) and gym shorts (so I wouldn't get kicked out of gym) and shampoo that I got to pick. She spent more than she could afford and certainly more than she would receive for my care, but she understood that if I was to have a chance to succeed in school, I would need them. That was special".

"One of my (foster) moms found out I liked hockey, so when I got there she asked me if I wanted to play hockey and then she helped me get it all set up so I could".

"My (foster) mom would make me bread when I came home from school because she knew how much I loved the smell of homemade bread".

# Belonging and Acceptance



This question examines the importance of feeling as if one belongs and is accepted. These are important concepts in the lives of young people, particularly so for youth who are in foster care.

Many youth pretty much always felt as if they belonged and were accepted in both their foster families and the communities they were living in (whether or not they were their own home communities).

A common secondary theme was how the extended families and peers played a major role in accepting them, which helped in making them feel normal.

Acceptance and feelings of belongingness are critical to an adolescent. Maturity and the ability to develop responsibility and reliability are tied to these important concepts as well. These critical experiences can impact how an individual will feel about him/herself for a long time. When these experiences are positive and meaningful, they will experience more success in life. Conversely, when these experiences are not positive, it can have a deleterious effect on an individual and will affect their adult capacities.

Overall, the positive experiences happened in the homes where the young person felt accepted for whom they were, regardless of their own life challenges and those were the most beneficial experiences for the youth.

"The best situation is when you call your foster family your *family*, and your foster home placement is your

*home*, not your foster home - I was in lots of foster placements, but now I'm just living at home with my family".

"We do a lot of group activities and everyone is easy to talk to and that makes a huge difference for me.

I have gotten to know everyone and everyone is easy to talk to and there is always company if I want it".

"At my foster home", says one young man, "it's kind of constant. Every time they go out they ask me to come-whether it's shopping or to the mall or to the beach or whatnot, they always ask me, and even the kids will ask is (foster brother) coming. They just like me and they like having me around and I feel like I am part of this family and they just like me and want me to come and it feels good".

"There used to be a 'foster family' picnic and I would always go with my foster family and it was really good-because everyone there was also in foster care, or else worked with people in foster care and everyone was the same and kind of understood what you had been through or been through something similar yourself".

"Everyone just accepted me when I was there-it was normal and not weird 'cause you weren't 'actually' from [foster moms' family]".

"When I met my friends at home and school, I felt included to have friends".

"The best situation is when you call your foster family your *family*, and your foster home placement is your *home*, not your foster home - I was in lots of foster placements, but now I'm just living at home with my family".

"At my school, some girls were trying to organize a cheerleading/dance club and they asked me if I wanted to join and I was like Yeah! And it was really fun. It was amazing and I really felt wanted in this group and I got to be a part of this really amazing fun group".

"I had some secrets that I finally shared with my foster parents here—it was ok, they said there was nothing wrong with that and they still accepted me. It

never changed how they acted towards me. I thought I was alone, but they showed me I'm not".

"When I moved to (my foster dads) house, I realized, he (foster dad) accepts me for who I am".

"When I was away and I came back I realized my (foster) mom had been thinking about me. She left me a surprise book on my bed. That made me feel like she really liked doing stuff for me, even when I wasn't there".

"They (foster parents) let me just focus on school and studying...and they make me feel like they want to know what I am thinking and they make me feel like they support my thoughts and it makes me feel like...they aren't going to think all my ideas are stupid".

"My (foster sister) helped me out a lot and helped me to find what I needed in someone who knows what my life has been like and she has helped me a lot and is sort of like my sister".

# Family Activities



This question asked the young people about family activities and fun. What makes family time fun? How important is it that the whole family spend time together?

Being a youth in foster care should be about the same issues that concern all young people.

For the youth who never had the opportunity to participate in activities when they were younger, such as going to a carnival, or camping with their family or going tobogganing at the local park, these experiences still seemed valuable.

It seems if provided a safe and fun opportunity to participate in childhood events even now, it could make a difference for them in their development from adolescent to adult.

Additionally, typical childhood activities such as playing in sports, attending family holiday activities, or negotiating with parents about activities often provide 'teachable moments' and assist individuals as they progress from childhood to adolescence and adolescence to adulthood.

Camping was mentioned

several times as something really unique and fun. When you camp, say youth, you are with your family and you are all together doing things or just hanging out together and having a good time. Just being together was important for most of these youth.

One young woman shared that her most fun memories were things like going to "Tinker Town with the whole family and going on every ride all day long because we got armbands, so we could go on and I got to hear my little sister laugh and scream and it was so fun!"

"Going tobogganing with my whole family was fun. Even the little kids were tobogganing and when they are screaming and laughing it just makes everything seem more fun".

"Sometimes we all go to the States for shopping or whatever, and its really fun".

One young man talked about "family night", where each child in his foster family

**"Going to Tinker Town with the whole family and going on every ride all day long because we got armbands, so we could go on and I got to hear my little sister laugh..."**

would get to pick a family event for the whole family each week. They usually picked pizza and a movie.

Three youth mentioned shopping, "We got to pick our own stuff and it didn't need to be the cheapest stuff there" or,

"I love shopping and (foster) mom takes us (foster kids) to

the States shopping and out to eat and stuff and we get to stay in hotels, it's amazing!"

"One thing that is really fun is Easter, and the family goes out at night and hides eggs, and then all the kids get to go find them. Also, my foster family and I have gone on several trips together to Minneapolis, Grand Forks and this year we are going to Edmonton. We go to neat places".

"Christmas is really fun. Everyone accepts me and it's like I am just part of the family. It's just normal and not weird".

"I just had my sweet sixteen, and we had a combined party with my real mom and family and my foster mom and family. Everyone came and it was really fun-it was my sweet sixteen".

# Personal Accomplishments



Question six asks the interviewee to remember a time when they have achieved something or accomplished something for themselves.

This is an important measuring stick for youth as they are learning about their own capabilities and their own abilities to care for themselves.

These individuals are quite an accomplished group. Several organized (biological) family get-togethers; some even had to travel out of province. Some had to challenge themselves and others to get what they wanted, and others had to challenge authority.

Several spoke of goals for the future, instead of accomplishments today, but it was clear they were doing both in their journey toward their overall future goal. These youth demonstrated persistence, confidence, intelligence and diligence to accomplish their goals.

These are all excellent examples of what can be accomplished if the opportunity is there. These youth were able to devote themselves to something important to them and they learned a valuable lesson from those experiences - they learned they could do it themselves.

In the words of one young man "my

biggest personal accomplishment was getting back into school. A lot of people I talked to didn't think school was for me, they figured it

was too hard...and I had to say no, I want to do it, I think I can do it...and now I'm back in school and I'm doing really well!"

"Sometimes I share my writing with

people and I went to a writing camp with the Writers Guild and I write about things I see or sometimes I write poetry".

One young man told of how he wanted a job and how hard he worked to get the job. "I wanted a job and I went to this hotel every day for weeks and asked for a job everyday and finally they said I could work there. It was great and I worked there for about eight months".

"I used to be really shy, and I had my head down all the time when I first came here. I really like to sing and when I went for a cultural weekend where I was from, I got up and sang in front of all these people, (about 300). I was really nervous, but I like to sing and I really wanted to do it and I did!"

"I saw my (foster dad) doing flips on our trampoline and I really wanted to learn how to do that. I

worked and worked at it and spent hours learning how to do it and now I do flips off of anything and even from on the ground, if I run. I worked hard to do it and now I can really impress people".

"I took Applied Math, and I passed! It was really hard, I struggled with math last year, in grade nine, but I worked really hard at it and I passed".

" I really wanted a horse, and I did everything I could to help out-I stepped up to show responsibility and more maturity and then, I got my own horse, to take care of".

" I got my bike. I had to do lots of yard work and save my allowance to earn enough money for my bike. It was 180.00 \$ and I saved up and earned enough money to buy myself a new bike. Now I feel free".

"When I got my first job-I applied a few times, and got my resume all ready and I finally got hired".

"I know what I want to do after high school and I figured out what I need to do to get there. I have to get a portfolio ready, and some essays and I have to have very good marks to get in (over 90% average), so I am taking pre-calculus this year to help myself with the process, if I want to get in (to university program, out of province) I have to have very good grades, so I am working very hard to make it happen".

# Parenting Strategies That Work



Question seven asks the youth about what they felt was important about the way they were being parented by their foster families. What were the qualities they appreciated about their foster parents?

The question was designed to encourage the young person to share stories about the parenting experiences they found effective and that helped instead of discouraged them.

Some talked about the value and importance of role-modeling. The responses varied, but the underlying message seemed to be the same. "They treat me like I'm their kid, they trust me, and they like me. They role model proper behavior for me and teach me how to take care of myself."

Trust was also a really significant aspect of effective parenting for many. They felt that if they were trusted, it was worth it for them to become trustworthy, otherwise, they said, why bother?

Foster parents just being there and being available was ranked very highly by most of the youth. Here is what some of the youth had to say about their foster parents and how what they did affected them.

"They are always there to talk to ... they understand about everything and anything you want to talk about like drugs, sex, drinking, school stuff or anything".

"She (foster mom) trusts me and

she is really supportive...she lets me make my own decisions and she talks to me about them".

"One family I had really encouraged me to just take responsibility for my surroundings. They encouraged me to find a family doctor and then to go to the doctor, they always had food in the fridge and I could eat whatever I wanted, I just had to clean it up, they just role modeled that if something needs doing, you just do it. I am better prepared to live on my own because I had them teaching me how to do it".

One young man said "My foster parents have accepted who I am and they trust me".

Another young man said, "They took me in and they make sure I don't do anything bad...by providing structure and having rules and stuff".

"My (foster mom) really listens to me and she doesn't judge me".

"At one family I was at, they always got us foster kids to help with all the family tasks, like cleanup our rooms, and we all had chores to do. She made sure we took regular showers to keep clean and she bought us fruit and veggies and she would let us cook sometimes. She made sure we stayed healthy, and at the store she would pick food that she knew we liked".

"I got to make my own decisions-and it's hard sometimes to make those decisions".

"My (foster) mom is really fun to hang out with. She makes life an adventure!"

"They tell me they love me, they cook, clean and help me, they ask me how I'm doing, they are there to support me".

"My (foster) mom stressed education for me, she made me tell

her stuff because it's not good to keep in anger, we would talk about everything, and she prioritized me in her time".

"Don't treat foster children as if they are any different from any other children, just treat them as if they are children-that's what my (foster) family does".

"I get grounded, I get reasonable discipline for negative behaviors-(foster) mom doesn't let me get away with crap, and she is helping me to be a better person".

"Some days, my foster parents just let me do whatever I feel like".

"My best foster parents have accepted who I was-they have to be enthusiastic and motivate you to do stuff, they have helped me boost my morale, my family now believes in me and say I can do what I want to do-I can do it!"

"They are always there to talk to ...they understand about everything and anything you want to talk about like drugs, sex, drinking, school stuff or anything."

# The Magic Wand Question



Question number eight asked youth for their wishes about how to make their (or someone they knew) foster care experience the best one they could imagine.

Their wishes were surprising in many ways. Surprising because they were so well grounded and they were not asking for the world, many asked for simple things that many young people would take for granted.

What they want is pretty basic. They want to be liked, treated with respect and like they are a worthwhile person.

They want to be loved and be a part of a family, even if it is not their biological one.

Almost universally, they wished for more contact between themselves and their social workers. They wanted it to be flexible, and caring and suited to their needs. One young woman told of a time when her worker came over for breakfast and she made her pancakes. She was so proud.

The young people wished for surprise home visits from their social workers. They wanted their workers to see their lives as they really are-not just the public face of it.

They wished to see their biological parents more, less or not at all.

They very clearly identified that contact with siblings was extremely important. Some were not especially interested in seeing their biological parents, but almost all wanted more contact with siblings. Some of the youth who have aged out of foster care live with their biological siblings now. Several planned to live with siblings or near them so

they could have more contact. The experiences shared by siblings as children and the knowledge and understanding brought by shared experiences- whether traumatic or wonderful- brings people together in important ways. There is a safety in common understandings as well.

Confronting the stereotypes was another significant issue. They said they hear all kinds of things about youth in foster care and they feel that a small proportion is representing the large group.

They wished for more control over their lives, and they wished for foster parents that do fostering because they want to, not for the money.

They want "less change...of social workers, and less change over in foster homes". Less is better, they say, although they acknowledge it can take time to find a good family match.

They wished that "people would not think of foster kids as this huge mess...that people would think something good about us".

"I wish for enough money to get what you need - for a good community and a good school".

"I wish that I could stay in one place for a long time and that my foster family was my real family".

"I wish I could have had a mentor or someone to help me out, who had been through this system, and I wish that I could have had more time with or lived with my biological siblings".

"More contact with family if you want it and especially try hard to keep sibling groups together".

"I would like to travel more".

" I would like to get my drivers licence so I can drive to places I want to go to".

"I wish I had lots of friends".

"That all foster parents would take the time to get to know their foster children".

"Foster parents should provide structure—they should take kids to do stuff on weekends or anytime-stuff that would help with bonding, and play together".

"Foster parents should have dedication and determination to raise kids as best they can- they have helped me to realize what I thought was bad, to what I know is good".

They very clearly identified that contact with siblings was extremely important.

# Youth talk about "The System"



The final question for the interview asked young people what they wanted people to know or understand about their situation and their lives.

Several youth spoke of the importance of being in a family unit where all children/youth were treated equally, whether they were biological or foster children in the family.

Many wanted to share special experiences they had, that made a difference in their lives.

"My foster parents make me feel like an equal", says one young man.

Young people also want things to be better, for themselves and others. "Workers can try to stop bad things from happening, I know they can't stop them all, but they could make a difference".

"For me being able to come to foster care was really good-I

needed a break and needed help - here I can get help and my family can too".

One young man said "Give up on large scale change of a system. Just work one on one with each child individually until that child is settled."

"Working together with foster parents and foster children to determine what's best for me".

One young man said "Give up on large scale change of a system. Just work one on one with each child individually until that child is settled".

"No one lets lots of kids tell their stories, we don't have any power, no one to take our sides and listen to our feelings, but if someone listens and believes in you...I was lucky, I had an amazing worker and she gave me her cell phone number and everything".

"The basic trust and relationships have to be there".

At the same time, youth wanted more contact with their workers.

"Do more drop in visits, so you can

see what's really happening in my home".

"Be available to just help and give advice to me or my foster parents".

"Kids...we need a friend and an adult that we can trust, my worker always said, call me if you need anything".

"Workers should call kids back!"

Overall youth shared many experiences.

Their willingness to share their experiences and be a part of any effort to make positive changes in the system that impacts and affects them the most speaks volumes about how intelligent, caring and thoughtful these young people are.

These youth are turning the tides and changing the rules and getting what they want and need in interesting and diverse ways. They are learning to help themselves and also learning when to ask for help. They have achieved much and will achieve more-they are committed and wanting to take care of themselves and learn from their experiences.



# Recommendations for change



## *Advocacy*

These young people radiated pride when they shared stories of people supporting them in ways which were not expected.

Advocacy - the youth really appreciated it when their foster parents or their social workers went 'to bat' for them and used their time, energy, resources, or power to help them out-whether it was something that a foster parent is typically responsible for or not. Examples include helping a young person get a job, get braces, get into a certain program or attend school. These seemed to be meaningful to these youth because it shows a special caring and willingness to help above and beyond the call of duty. Many of these youth come from homes where there are few resources, less understanding, and fewer abilities to challenge the systemic problems that helped create the issues in their lives.

Having someone who does want to support them to get what they need is really important. In the words of one youth...."kids need an adult to believe in them and trust them". Having that one person that a young person can trust who trusts him or her, can make a real difference.

## *Creating Family Memories*

When whole families participate together in events, such as camping, trips to recreational activities and locales, the beach, or just a general family outing such as tobogganing, it is these events which help to create a sense of family.

Sharing events and special memories helps to create or re-create a sense of family that is especially significant for these youth.

This is an area that could be supported throughout the child welfare system. Mail outs of family events, financial or other support for outings, or events, or starting the foster family picnic again would all be things that could be done to facilitate those connections.

Encouraging young people to maintain and organize family events with either biological family or foster family would also be looked upon favorably by these youth.

Above all communicate with foster families about the importance of having a family meal together often, and spending time together as a family. These times can be at home or out, but events where the whole family is interacting together are really worthwhile.

## *Promotion of Self-Esteem*

When youth felt valued and appreciated for their special uniqueness it was a really incredible feeling for them. The acknowledgement by families of a special characteristic of an individual in their care is truly an exceptional feeling.

Some effective families went out of their way to support their foster children by doing something they knew their foster child liked or found pleasurable. Examples include making a favorite food for a snack, helping them connect with a group, or by demonstrating their approval of the child's accomplishments. Another good example is by giving them something special (a book, a hug or some time together-it doesn't have to cost anything) this is a simple way to show a young person that you care about them.

The encouragement, development and promotion of self-esteem is a powerful tool that will assist and enable the youth in foster care to have successful lives and to achieve their goals.

# Recommendations for change



## *Contact with workers*

Contact with workers - The youth in foster care, almost universally, want more contact with their workers.

Increasing the ability of social workers to have more contact with the young people they care for could result in very meaningful benefits for youth. The social worker often provides the sole link of consistency, continuity and safety that is so very valuable for youth.

Many of the young people noted they had numerous workers over the years and definitely felt this was a serious limitation and indicated it affected their relationships with their workers.

The ones who had developed a relationship with their social workers found this to be valuable and worthwhile. Some of these relationships had gone on for years, and provided a close relationship of trust for the youth.

## *Family Contact*

Family contact - The youth wished for more contact with family, and often, especially with siblings. The relationship of siblings to each other is very important and probably even more so in the world of foster care as, again, siblings can provide a needed link and connection to family relationships. Even when, and perhaps especially when, the relationships between youth and biological parents were seriously damaged, the sibling relationships were of paramount importance.

This could be supported in many ways-such as: keeping sibling groups together, arranging regular visits with siblings, and keeping siblings in the same community, neighborhood, city or province. Arranging funding for visits for those who do not have siblings close enough to see regularly would be beneficial. Finally, simply provide whatever support is needed, so contact between siblings can be achieved on a regular basis.

## *Acceptance, Support and Respect*

The importance of acceptance, support and respect were articulated by many of the young people interviewed. Acceptance of who we are is very powerful and provides a basis for self respect, which is an important goal for all youth. Being in homes where support, acceptance and respect were regularly modeled was appreciated by youth. They felt by being respected, they were learning to be respectful. By being supported, they were learning to manage their lives and issues that arise. When they were supported in problem solving or future planning (or any aspect of their lives), they were able to learn from practical experience and apply their knowledge and experience elsewhere. When they were integrated into a family and were able to help by being part of a solution to a problem, it was meaningful and a learning experience. Working together to make things better for themselves or their families helped the young people feel good about themselves.

The system can work with families to help make these concepts a daily reality by providing training to foster families and supporting youth by accepting them and including them in decision making and planning for their lives.

*"kids need an adult to believe in them and trust them".*

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