



## Your Voice Matters: Speaking Out by Speaking Up

Your voice matters and you deserve to be heard. Hopefully your experiences of being in the foster care system were good experiences. But the child welfare system is constantly changing. Speaking out and speaking up about foster care and adoption issues are key steps in advocating for changes you want to see. You have the power to make changes in your life and the lives of others.

### What is advocacy and how do I do it?

Advocacy is about having the courage to speak out about something that motivates you. Often just in telling your story (through speeches, poems, writing, etc.) you will be a powerful influence to social workers, foster parents, law makers, and others. Doing research and educating others is key to strong advocacy.

Advocating can occur on a local, state or national level. The Wisconsin Youth Advisory Council (YAC) has been around since 2008 and have participated in advocacy events here in Wisconsin as well as in Washington D.C. to help improve lives of other youth in care. These three young adults have also advocated for child welfare changes at the local and state level, as well. You can choose what is most important to you and which issues you would like to address.

### Building Connections

We all need help from others. This is especially true when you are advocating for something you believe in, which is something the YAC members have experienced over the last year. They began their group with help from staff from child welfare agencies and have grown considerably because they work as a group. Advocating with others is a

powerful mechanism to have your voices heard.

Joining together for a common cause can be a rewarding experience, and there is definitely strength in numbers. Following are some suggestions as to how to go about finding others who might have similar

beliefs or situations as you.

- Is there a local foster care or adoptive advisory council in your area? Check with your social worker. If there's not a local council, you might ask your social worker if you could participate in the Youth Advisory Council.
- Conduct an online search to find a local, state, or national advocacy group.
- Ask your social worker or independent living coordinator for resource lists of support or advocacy groups. Also check with your local [United Way agency](#).
- Participate in a fund raiser or community awareness event.



Continued on page 2



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## Influencing Change

When you make a choice to become an advocate, you embark down the road of invoking change not only for yourself, but also for the lives of countless others. Laws and policies can be created, amended, altered, or deleted. Advocating for change can have a dramatic impact. As Eleanor Roosevelt said, “*Never underestimate the ability of a small group of dedicated people to change the world. It’s the only thing that ever has.*”

## Assertiveness vs. Aggressiveness

Being assertive means you talk about your concerns in a confident way. You make your points by backing them up with factual information. By taking an assertive approach with others, you will be opening the door for a mutually open conversation.

On the other hand, taking an aggressive stance can lead to conflict and confusion. Approach means everything.

Consider how different the outcome would be in the following example of someone talking with his caseworker about issues of trust and communication. Both statements are about the same topic, but the way the communication style is presented is quite differently:

*An aggressive approach:* “You never listen to me! My foster parents are always up in my business and they don’t trust me and they never will! They expect me to be perfect all the time. That will never happen. I am not going to listen to them or you ever again!”

*An assertive approach:* “I really need to talk with you about something that has been going on with my foster parents. They don’t seem to trust me lately and I’m not sure why. Can you sit down and help all of us work this out? I want them to be able to trust me and I would like to know why they don’t seem to trust me. Thanks for your help.”

## Key Points

- ✓ What you have to say is important.
- ✓ Do your research.
- ✓ Be prepared to speak up by speaking out.
- ✓ Your voice matters.
- ✓ You need to be heard.
- ✓ You can and will make a difference.
- ✓ Speak up with confidence and conviction.
- ✓ Be assertive.
- ✓ Most importantly, be yourself.

*How* you explain something is just as important as *what* you’re explaining. In the above example, the issues at hand were trust and communication. In the first example, the young man had a blaming tone and the conversation went down hill.

In the second example, the young man expressed his concerns and asked for assistance in order to help him work through the trust issues with his foster parents.

While it may seem obvious which approach to use, too often people who are passionate about something—which advocates are!—lose sight of the other person’s perspective.

## Preparation is Essential

When you advocate for a cause, you want to be respected, and it is important to prepare yourself ahead of time.

- Do your research about the topic.
- Be prepared.
- Organize your presentation.
- Practice, practice, practice.
- Be confident. Be respectful. Be yourself.

Continued on page 3



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- Stick to the facts.
- Say thank you.
- Talk with your caseworker about any issues or concerns you are experiencing.
- Schedule a meeting with your school advisor.
- Talk with your parents.

### Discovering What Approach Works Best for You

Learning how to become an effective advocate does not happen overnight. With practice, you will identify your own advocacy comfort level. Do you communicate effectively in writing or by public speaking? Can you confidently talk to large groups or are do you feel more comfortable speaking to a smaller group in a more personal setting?

Some people seek out the spotlight. They enjoy being the center of attention and are comfortable speaking in public. Others are more reserved and have no interest in speaking publicly.

No matter what your personality is, you can be an effective advocate. Be yourself and play to your strengths.

The following are some ways in which you can advocate for change:

- Vote.
- Write a letter to the editor of a newspaper.
- Volunteer for a cause you believe in.
- Become a mentor.
- Join or create an advocacy group.
- Share your story with others.

- Get involved in a community awareness event.
- Join a community, school, or church group.
- Call a legislator.
- Schedule a meeting with a legislator.
- Testify before Congress.
- Run for a public office.
- Ask to speak to foster care or

adoption leaders.

- Talk with your caseworker about any issues or concerns you are experiencing.
- Schedule a meeting with your school advisor.
- Talk with community leaders.
- Talk with your parents.



### Your Voice Matters

Choosing to be an advocate is admirable. It takes hard work and dedication. Advocating for change can result in changes locally, state-wide or nationally, and perhaps best of all, changes within your self as you realize you have the right to be heard. When you speak up for yourself, you are speaking up for countless others.



Resources on page 4



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## Online Resources

- [Wisconsin Youth Advisory Council](#)
- [Kids Forward](#)
- [Wisconsin Family Ties](#)
- [Alliance for Strong Families and Communities](#)
- [National Collaboration for Youth](#)
- [Child Welfare League of America](#)
- [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#)
- [Independent Living for Children in Out-Of-Home Care in Wisconsin](#)
- [The Annie E. Casey Foundation](#)
- [Children's Defense Fund](#)

## Foster Care & Adoption Resource Center [Library Resources](#)

- *Finding Our Place: A Guide for Young People Entering Foster Care*
- *Do You Have What It Takes? A Comprehensive Guide to Success After Foster Care*
- [Sharing Your Story](#)



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