

Sharing Your Story

Jarod and his sister Tiona are both adopted after living in foster care for the past three years. Donovan, their caseworker, has asked them to share their personal life story to a training group of new foster parents.

Although feeling quite successful and confident, this brother-sister team is hesitant to accept the offer to talk about their life journey. What do they say about their life, their family and themselves? How much detail should be shared? Will they be heard and understood by this audience of foster parents?

We All Have a Story to Tell

We have all had a journey through life, often experiencing great memories and good times but also events that were harsh and difficult. As a foster or adopted youth, there may be opportunities for you to share your life story.

You may be assigned to write a school essay about your life, present a speech in class or create artwork or a video that describes your life story. Perhaps a reporter asks for an interview from a newspaper or radio with an interest in learning about the paths you traveled in foster care and adoption. You may also have a chance to share your story on a youth internet site or blog.

Why Share My Personal Story?

There are many reasons to share your life

story. Your story can be very powerful and influential.

Often when you tell your story, you can:

- Feel more empowered and self confident in hearing your voice speak out about your experiences and survival.

We hope that our stories will come to mind the next time they are making decisions that could enhance the lives of former and current youth in care.

- Recognize your strength and resilience.
- Make sense of your experiences.
- Change the stereotypes and stigmas connected to kids in foster care and adoption.
- Be a strong advocate for making changes to the foster care and adoption system.

Others can also benefit if you share your

experiences. By telling your story it may:

- Educate people who work with foster and adopted youth (like case workers, foster and adoptive parents, judges, cops and teachers) to better understand, help and work with kids in foster care and adoption.
- Reassures other kids in care that they are not alone with this experience.
- Influence others such as lawmakers and foster care and adoption agencies to make needed rule and funding changes for foster care and adoption programs.
- Make connections and form relationships when others understand the issues facing youth in foster care and adoption.

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Where to Start

When you think about sharing your story and life journey with others, you may feel nervous, anxious, and hesitant. These feelings are normal. To help you know if sharing your story is right for you, consider the following:

- What are the pros and cons of sharing your story?
- What would the benefits be to you and to your audience?
- Ask yourself, “Have I healed emotionally so that I can actually tell my story?” “Is my story too painful to tell right now?”
- Write an outline of your presentation. Do a mock interview. This could help you decide if you are ready to make a public presentation.
- What could be the downside of telling your story? Could it be hurtful, unsafe or unhealthy for you, family members or others? If you are not sure, talk this over with others.

How Can I Best Tell My Story?

When sharing your life story, you will want it to be a meaningful and effective story. Because of your experience in foster care and adoption, you may have a chance to talk about your life journey through the following ways:

- Panel/workshop
- Interview
- Written article/poem
- Video
- Blog/website/youth message boards
- Speech/presentation
- Artwork
- Photos

You have special talents. Are you best at poetry writing, rather than speaking in front of a group? Figure out how you can best share about your life journey based on your interests and talents.

YAC DVD for Legislators

In the Spring of 2009, the members of the [Youth Advisory Council of Wisconsin](#) made a DVD for legislators.

“We did this video in order to make foster youth more ‘real’ to legislators, rather than a statistic,” says Margaret Anderson, former youth in care.

“We hope that through this video and our personal stories, they will see the impact their decisions have on youth and see more than just a dollar value. We hope that our stories will come to mind the next time they are making decisions that could enhance the lives of former and current youth in care.”

Christine Lenske, independent living coordinator for Wisconsin’s Department of Children and Families, adds, “Youth are really the experts regarding the experience of foster care—they have been the consumers of Wisconsin’s child welfare system, and we are interested in what they have to say. The State has spoken to the Youth Advisory Council on a number of occasions to get their perspective and input on various policy issues.”

Guidelines to Sharing

If you decide to share your life story with others here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Share the details of your story only if you do not care that the information is shared with your family, friends, community and the world! Your story will not be confidential and may become known to many. Stories can still be shared without telling all the details that are too intimate or personal.

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- Include some ideas to solve the problems that you faced. For example, rather than sharing information about the mental health issues suffered by your parent that resulted in your foster care placement, talk about how you want agencies and caseworkers to help families with mental health problems so kids can still live at home.



- Be organized—take notes or create an outline.
- Who is your audience?
- What is the topic for the audience and how does your personal experience fit with it?
- What is the purpose of sharing your personal story?
- What do you want the audience to learn?
- What details of your story will be shared and what will remain private?

Content of Your Story

For a meaningful and successful sharing of your life story, include the following in it:

- Interpret your experience. Share what your experiences mean to you and how you were affected. (“When I moved from so many foster homes, it was hard for me to connect with the foster families. I still have trouble feeling close to people.”)
- If you become emotional during the presentation, identify the emotion and explain why you share it. (“I missed out on spending time with my brother. I really feel sad when I think about this. I think it is important for you to hear and understand how kids in foster care feel.”)

- Give reasons to the audience why you are sharing certain experiences and how it fits with the issue or topic of the audience. (“I felt so alone and sad.

Because of this, I tried to run away many times to find my brother.”)

Practice your presentation. Outline the topic and events that you want to discuss or present and practice your speech out loud in front of your parents or caseworker.

If you are telling your story through a drawing or artwork, share it with others and explain its meaning. Listen to their opinions and their understanding of the art.

By setting your personal boundaries and following simple guidelines, your life story can be meaningful to others. You may help other current or former youth in care and the people who serve them—all through the power of sharing your story!



Resources

- *On Their Own*, by M. Shire and G. Stangler
- *To Whom it May Concern: Poetry by Readers of Represent: The Voice of Youth*, by Youth Communication
- *Keeping It Secret: Teens Write About Foster Care Stigma*, by Youth Communication
- [*Represent*](#), a monthly magazine for youth in care that is written and edited by youth.
- [*The Mockingbird Times*](#), a newspaper written by youth in foster care.



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