

## Encouraging and Supporting Tweens and Teens in Care

**Y**outh in foster care often feel different from their peers, and as they grow into the tween and teen years, chances are that those feelings intensify. During this developmental stage, youth mostly just want to fit in with their friends and peers. At times, being a part of the child welfare system can get in the way of youth feeling like a “typical teen” and increase their sense of feeling different from their peers.

There are a lot of “typical” behaviors that most every teen will experience: rebellion, being demanding, an occasional negative attitude, and an influx of emotional responses to situations and feelings. As a result, going through this particular developmental phase can be a confusing time for all. Add to this being away from your birth family, living in a new, unfamiliar home, and possibly attending an unfamiliar school, and it’s easy to see how those typical tween and teen behaviors can seem exaggerated from time to time for youth in out-of-home care.

No one wants to feel different or singled out, especially teens and young adults. And, like adults, most youth want to feel like they are being listened to and that their feelings are validated. There are a number of ways you can show your support for a tween or teen in your care who is

navigating his or her their feelings of being different, and help him or her feel more like a “typical” tween or teen. In most cases, youth in out-of-home care can participate in many of the “normal” coming of age activities just like their peers. However, we recommend discussing these activities with the caseworker for the youth in your care before proceeding.



**Participating in extracurricular activities.** Whether a youth in your care participates through school or another organization, these groups, teams, and clubs can help him find his peer group. Taking part in an extracurricular activity can

help him feel accepted by others and give him the chance to spend time with peers who share a similar interest. Extracurricular activities can also benefit youth as they go on to find a job or post-high school success.

**Peer groups.** Tweens and teens are trying to find where they fit in and may choose to interact with a variety of peer groups. As a foster parent, you have the opportunity to be a sounding board to guide them through both the positive and the negative experiences they may encounter with their peer groups, such as bullying, peer pressure, loyalty, and reliability. You can help teach them how to ask for help, to have a trusting relationship with adults, and

*Continued on page 3*

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## Paying It Forward: From Youth in Care to Advocate

**A**shley Stokes was four years old when she and her little sister entered the foster care system. Looking back, she doesn't remember all of the details, but she does have one very powerful memory: "Just feeling alone and scared," she said. She remembers the impulse to fight, to protect what was hers; in many ways, that impulse is still with her.

Ashley remained in foster care and, at age 16, decided to enroll in a Supervised Independent Living program. She's been through a lot in her life and has learned a lot, too. Because of her experiences, Ashley is passionate about helping other kids who are where she once was. She's working in the human services field and is in her second term as President of the statewide Youth Advisory Council, a group that she has been involved with for eight years.

As a girl in her tween years, Ashley lived with a foster family who she remembers as being the best family she met. "That family really taught me a lot about what family should mean and the core values of family," she said. "The father of that family, he taught me how a man should treat a woman – not only telling me but showing me things that he would do for his wife." Unfortunately, Ashley's foster mother passed away in 2002 and, shortly thereafter, Ashley left that home. The foster father she remembers so fondly also passed away in 2008. Even so, the experiences she had with that foster family has stayed with her. "They taught me the value of family and they didn't even know they were doing it. They were just being themselves in their normal daily life and I was looking and I was paying attention."

Ashley's experiences weren't all so positive; nor were they all memorable for happy reasons. She learned to look out for herself, to take advantage of everything that the child welfare system had to offer and could provide for her; and she learned how to be an advocate for herself. From the age of 12 on, she regularly asked to speak with the judge assigned to her case. "They have to speak up," Ashley says of youth in care. "It's their life."

Listening to Ashley talk, it's very clear where her passion lies. She dreams of traveling as a motivational and inspirational speaker. "I just want to go around

the world and talk to foster kids and be a resource to them and an asset to them and a person [who they can say of], 'You know what? She was in the same situation as me. But look at her now.' I want to be someone that they can look up to, because I look up to them. 'I know. I know exactly what you're going through and it's going to get better.

It's really going to get better. It may not seem like it that day, but it's going to get better. Because I've been through it."

From this young lady came some powerful words for all those who work with children and youth in care:

"I think the first action is really seeing the child. It's really all about getting to know who you're dealing with. Talk to them. *Talk*. It takes patience to work with a child. Kids need love. That's the big thing. Everybody needs love. And if you give a child some love, even if it was a hug, you know how big a hug can go? That child might break down and tell you everything if you gave them a hug. It doesn't take much to make someone who's used to nothing happy. Patience and love. You really gotta have that. If you work in this field, you need that."

*Our conversation with Ashley really touched the entire staff at the Coalition. We want to thank her for opening up to us, for sharing about her experiences in care and her desire to have a positive and lasting impact on the lives of children and youth in foster care.*



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## *Encouraging and Supporting Tweens and Teens in Care, continued*

learn how to handle similar situations as they grow and mature.

**Searching for a job.** An after school or weekend job can help a youth learn responsibility while also gaining some independence. They'll also learn valuable skills for looking and applying for a job, which will help them in adulthood, too. As a foster parent, you might use this as an opportunity to teach the youth in your care about responsible money management skills, which will be valuable throughout their life.

**Dating.** This can be a scary word for any parent! However, dating is a very typical part of being a teenager. That said, it is important to keep in mind that youth in care are a vulnerable population and at an increased risk for exploitation. As a foster parent, you can keep the youth in your care safe by monitoring dating activities and modeling healthy relationships; especially if they have not had or witnessed positive relationships in the past. Be open and available to the youth in your care when they have questions pertaining to dating and establishing healthy relationships. With safeguards in place, allowing the youth in your care to explore dating experiences can help them feel empowered to make healthy choices for themselves.

**Driving.** This is a skill that teens use throughout their lives. However, for teens in out-of-home care, this is an activity that may have some restrictions. Talk with your caseworker, licensing worker, or independent living coordinator for guidance about your licensing agency's policies around a youth in your home learning to drive and obtaining a driver's license. If you cannot help teach the teen in your care to drive, you may want to teach him how to safely navigate public transportation, if that is available where you live.



**Applying for college.** There are a number of scholarships and grants available to youth in care wishing to go on to post-secondary education. Foster parents can help youth look and apply for these and other financial aid that may be available to them to help them afford a college education. Talk with your agency's Independent Living Coordinator, School Counselor and/or caseworker for additional resources and guidance. The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families offers a scholarship for youth in out-of-home care. You can learn more by visiting: <https://www.gtc.edu/sites/default/files/files/documents/1487779956/DCFScholarshipApplication.pdf>. To apply for federal student aid, loans, and grants, prospective students need to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FASFA). The application helps determine eligibility for federal aid. For additional information on FASFA visit <https://fafsa.ed.gov/> to fill out a free application.

Being a tween or teen in out-of-home care adds some differences to these experiences. Tweens and teens are trying to figure out who they are and how they fit into the larger world, and being in foster care may add to this struggle to figure out their identity. As a foster parent, the youth in your care will look to you for guidance, support, and understanding. You can be a model for healthy relationships and communication skills. Additionally, you are in a unique role to be able to provide structure, support, advocacy, and guidance to the youth in your care in order to help them thrive during these complex developmental stages in their lives.



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# Resources

## Tip Sheets

### **What's Behind These Behaviors?**

wifostercareandadoption.org/resources/tipsheets

### **Fostering Older Youth**

wifostercareandadoption.org/resources/tipsheets

### **Supporting Youth Who Transition Out of the Foster Care System at Age 18**

wifostercareandadoption.org/resources/tipsheets

## Personal Stories

### **Stories about Youth in Care or Former Youth in Care**

wifostercareandadoption.org/youth/personal stories

### **Personal Stories**

wifostercareandadoption.org/resources/personal stories

## Additional Resources

- Federal Student Aid – FAFSA  
<https://fafsa.ed.gov/>
- Wisconsin Youth Advisory Council  
[facebook.com/pages/Wisconsin-Youth-Advisory-Council-YAC/355036244610565](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Wisconsin-Youth-Advisory-Council-YAC/355036244610565)
- Independent Living for Children in Out-of-Home Care  
<https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/independentliving>

## Books

- ⇒ *Parenting At The Speed Of Teens: Positive Tips On Everyday Issues*, by Peter Benson
- ⇒ *Why Do They Act That Way? A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen*, by David Walsh
- ⇒ *Analyze This! - A Teen Guide to Therapy and Getting Help*, by Youth Communication
- ⇒ *For When I'm Famous: A Teen Foster/Adopt Lifebook*, by Adoption Works

### **Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parent Association (WFAPA)**



WFAPA provides great opportunities to network with other foster and adoptive parents. Their spring conference will be held April 24-25, 2015 at the Metropolis Resort in Eau Claire. They also have an extensive website, [wfapa.org](http://wfapa.org), a newsletter, and a network of supportive WFAPA members and other foster parents who can be a resource for you.

### **Contact Us!**

Please know that we are always here for additional information, resources, and support.

You can contact us toll-free at

**800-947-8074**

or via email at

**[info@wifostercareandadoption.org](mailto:info@wifostercareandadoption.org)**

## **Where to Find Us on Social Media**

### **Facebook**

[facebook.com/coalitionforcyf](https://www.facebook.com/coalitionforcyf)

### **Twitter**

[twitter.com/coalitionforcyf](https://twitter.com/coalitionforcyf)



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