



## WHAT ONE “YOOPER” HAS LEARNED ABOUT YOUTH INVOLVEMENT

I've been a Wraparound Coordinator for almost 5 years now in Upper Michigan. The town of Marquette has 21,000 people, while the County of Marquette has close to 70,000 people in it. Marquette is the most populated county in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan; the “U.P.” is the chunk of land that connects to Wisconsin and is sometimes mistakenly included in the blue of Lake Superior. We are blessed to live on the shores of Lake Superior.

While not a native to the area, I can tell you the natives (often called “Yoopers”) are fiercely proud of the natural beauty of this area, of their heritage and their future. The U.P. can, however, be a tough place for young people. While Marquette itself has Northern Michigan University, a huge regional medical facility, a YMCA, a Children's Museum, a skateboard park and many city parks, even the towns lying 15 miles outside of Marquette leave these opportunities almost unreachable for many young people. We are 8 hours from Detroit, and yet only 3 hours from Green Bay, Wisconsin. For families and young people, however, our issues and Detroit's tend to be the same. My “southern” colleagues and I trade ideas about meeting families' needs for transportation, good childcare, jobs that pay enough to pay the bills, and ways to prevent too much and too easy access to illegal drugs.

What I've learned about the vital nature of involving youth in wrap around has come from listening to them in as many venues as possible. At our state conference, the teen panel has been the most important learning experience for me. We generally have 510 high school age youth on the panel discussing the positive and not-so positive aspects of being involved in wraparound. When they speak in Child and Family Team meetings, I listen to what they say works and doesn't work for them both in their life and in the wraparound meetings. I ask questions and listen to my nieces and nephews talk about different groups they participate in. I listen to kids talk to each other, and what they say about how they are treated by adults. We know that we can't plan well for youth, if we can't plan with them. It probably sounds like a pipe dream to think about having kids at all the meetings, and it is not always easy for us to have youth participate.

However, we have had some incredible successes and have been proud (and humbled) to watch these young people's skills develop. One of the things youth have made me keenly aware of is that sitting around a table or a living room is really a “grownups” style of doing work. We talk, we write on paper on the walls, we agree, we disagree, we keep working towards our goal. We follow an outline, a process, and a set of guidelines. Sometimes we have notes, sometimes someone takes notes—as facilitators, as professionals, these are skills we have been taught, we have practiced, and we are evaluated on. For the most part, I have found that as professionals we expect families and youth to have these same skills when we sit down for a meeting. It takes everyone time to learn these skills.

Help youth prepare ahead of time. This might be as simple as making sure they know they are invited and welcome. Let them know what happens at meetings. I'm big on using humor, and so, when I can, I may gently tease a teenager and tell them, ‘I know you hate when we talk about you, so you might as well come to the meeting and hear what we're saying!’ Know the young people you work with; maybe humor is the best invitation, maybe it's telling them, in brief, the benefits you feel it could have, based on the concerns they've expressed to you. Encourage them to write a list of questions ahead of time. Let them be the one who writes on the papers. Let them read your notes as you write.

I have been working for a period of time with a young woman, now 17, whose only living parent's rights were terminated 2 years ago. She used to hate coming to meetings, because she said we only talked about things that weren't important, and she never got to say what she needed to. I was fairly embarrassed to admit she was often right! In preparation for the next few statements she could make when she felt we were getting too personal, when she felt like we weren't listening to her. We talked about what to say when she felt like she was getting mad and was going to need to leave. We also talked about lists, and organizing her questions/statements into categories. We've only done this much work twice; now she makes her own organized lists ahead of time, and she's never left a meeting. She has, on many occasions, told us she's

getting mad and she's "getting ready to walk out". We've learned this really means we are 'ganging up on her,' without realizing it.

She was also quick to point out to us that one of her needs was: "One consequence per inappropriate behavior, and not one consequence per worker." Get it? All five of us involved, because we cared, all felt like we had to talk with her and give her our opinion on the issue. Whew!! What wisdom! We have learned to back off and delegate whose responsibility it is to follow up with her, and mostly? It's hers. And her foster parents.

Once again, she taught us.

More than ever, with youth, like with anyone who is in unfamiliar territory in a meeting with professionals, it is extremely important to make sure no one is interrupting. Young people are very sensitive to the different power structures already created by age, and ignoring them or cutting them off only exaggerates their feelings that they are not welcome and that we don't care about their opinion. Again, teaching them ways to tell us to "back off" or "listen up" help a meeting flow and the young people feel like they have an equal seat at the table.

Encourage them to bring friends!! No one wants to go places like this alone! Ask them if they know how to explain to their friends what will happen there. Give them ideas, if they are open to that. Use your extra best manners when their friends come. Remember the developmental stage that adolescents are in, where they value their friends opinion much more highly than most adults, especially their parents. Their friends can say the same things as you, but youth might hear it much easier and quicker coming from a friend.

I saw this happen in front of my eyes, when a 16 year-old brought two friends his parents had invited to come. As a team, we had gotten stuck. The family was frustrated that their son was going to drop out of school. The son was frustrated that they weren't listening to him. Eventually, the friends of this young man were able to confront his parents on his behalf, but also confronted him when he wasn't listening to his parents. It wasn't magic, but it was the magic touch that night.

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## Seven Suggestions

Here are my Top 7 suggestions on being youth friendly in Wrap-Around, and my thanks to all the people who have taught me these lessons.

1. Eat. Have food. Remember how hungry you were after school, after work, when you're nervous. Besides, it's good manners, and people love it.
2. No putdowns.
3. Hold the line on no interruptions.
4. Laugh as often as you can.
5. Remember how hard it was to be 8 or 12 or 17.
6. If you serve coffee to the adults, serve the young people something to drink as well.
7. Learn young people's comfort zones, encourage them to set good boundaries, and help it happen if need be.