



## LESSONS IN STRENGTHS-BASED YOUTH INVOLVEMENT: MINDING THE MAYS, THE DOS AND THE POSSIBLES

By the time most youth find their way to therapeutic foster care they have heard all the mustn'ts, don'ts, shouldn'ts, impossibles and won'ts. They are well versed in what they cannot do, what they have not done, and who they should not be.

Imagine planning a vacation, and only being given pictures and maps to places you may not go. How could you choose a destination, let alone plan the route you'll drive to get there? Young people in care are often expected to find their way to positive change with little more than a "map" (or care plan) of things they should not do and professionals lined up to point out each time they take a misstep or a wrong turn.

Youth development and strengths-based perspective are popular concepts now with people who work with youth. Too often they resemble intellectual exercises more than tenets for good practice. As is frequently the case, the translation from theoretical musings to practice can be quite difficult. This piece shares some experiences one agency, Growing Home (formerly Human Service Associates), is having applying positive youth development principles into practice with our youth in therapeutic foster care.

### THERAPEUTIC FOSTER CARE — BEYOND "MANAGING" AND "FIXING"

Youth referred to therapeutic foster care tend to be viewed as difficult for the adults around them to "manage." Often they are seen as having "failed" in regular foster homes and they have well-developed and often-practiced coping skills that are seen as maladaptive to optimal functioning.

Because therapeutic foster care is defined from a medical model, our referral sources are very much rooted



in a deficit perspective. In a nutshell, youth are referred to us for help in "fixing" their negative or destructive behaviors. In many states care provider per diems are based on a "difficulty of care scale," basically a checklist of how "bad" or difficult a youth is for providers to deal with. It is sort of a built-in bias that assures each difficult behavior or personal characteristic of a youth is highlighted in charting and in staffing meetings. Providing foster care might well be the only job on earth that pays less for better performance.

In spite of the above, there is an increasing recognition that professionals working in direct practice with youth in care must begin taking strengths-based approaches to their work. Some of this recognition has been generated by the fact that it is becoming ever more clear that many of the methods and approaches traditionally used in foster care have not resulted in positive outcomes for youth once they leave care. Simply put, we need to do some things differently. Positive youth development, strengths-based practice, and community youth development are ideas whose time has come. Each of these concepts overlaps with the others, and when combined they create clear principles for best practice for work with youth in care. Together, these perspectives can be loosely paraphrased as *Youth have voices. Youth, families, communities and agencies are better when youth are supported to actively use their voices.*

Youth development concepts apply generally to all youth. They refer to processes and experiences that are required in order for young people to develop the capacities necessary to lead successful adult lives. Like all other young adults, youth in care require normalized developmental experiences in order to prepare for successful adulthood.

Agencies providing foster care will have to become deliberate in utilizing a strengths-based

perspective and empowering approaches to work with youth in care if youth are to reap the benefits of youth development efforts. Unfortunately, there are numerous systemic ways that youth in care are told explicitly and implicitly that their voices do not matter, their relationships are not important and that the quality of their care experience is not relevant.

Many youth in care simply are not provided opportunities to participate in the types of activities that might help them develop the internal and external life skills that come through participation in various youth development activities. They are too busy attending to their “issues.” The strengths-based approach affirms youth as experts in their own lives and as leaders towards improving the care system. They have a passion born from the experience of living within the system.

### **GROWING HOME’S EXPERIENCE**

It is difficult to articulate individual events or to provide a clean, chronological accounting of how Growing Home came to where we are today in terms of youth participation. One caveat, we are not anywhere near where we want to be. We hold a vision at Growing Home of the kind of place we want to be, and the kinds of experiences we want youth in care in our homes to have. We will be striving to achieve that vision for a long time. The vision will change and grow the deeper we explore what youth development means for us and for the youth in our care.

Growing Home’s roots and commitment to youth voice goes back more than a decade. In August 1987 together with other therapeutic foster care agencies in Minnesota, Growing Home hosted a small conference for youth in care. Patricia Harmon, Growing Home’s CEO/President invited Alex Saddington, from The National Association of Young People in Care (NAYPIC) in England to address the youth. Patricia was determined that Minnesota youth would have the opportunity to listen to Alex without adults present, as Alex had requested. With Patricia “guarding the doors,” to keep adults out, a spark was lit. The spark was not literal, as expected by many of the adults who feared a bunch of youth in care together in a room without staff supervision. The spark was of a different sort. Hearing, many for the first time, that in other parts of the world, youth in (or from) foster care were actually organized, connected with each other and participating in many ways to improve services to youth and families, they began to understand the power of their voice. Their hope was sparked.

Thus, The Minnesota Association of Young People Aware in Care (MAYPAC) was born. Adults and youth alike struggled with what MAYPAC should look like and how adults and youth should function together to make the organization work. Geography and limited clarity of direction led to MAYPAC’s entering what I like to think of as a hibernation period. The organization has existed mostly just in name for about four years. The process of developing MAYPAC left behind a core group of believers—adults and youth who understand that it is a good thing to facilitate youth in care building connections with each other. We believe that agencies, the system at large and individual youth have much to gain by the amplification of youth voice. I remain confident of a MAYPAC rebirth. Like a phoenix rising. Much like the way many youth in care have risen through and over the unbelievably challenging circumstances of their lives.

Coming from the experience as MAYPAC’s fiscal agent and primary “institutional” support, Growing Home’s Board of Directors decided to take a decisive step toward integrating youth voice at Growing Home. They created a new position, Youth Development Director and hired the author of the present article, a social worker who was a youth in care, albeit quite a few years ago, for the position. They banked on the idea that having someone who had been in care in a leadership position at the agency would bring youth voice to the forefront quickly and powerfully. Positive youth development began to find its way into the consciousness of the agency. Many staff began to see the value in involving youth in things beyond their care plans, and many of us came to similar conclusions about the work to be done.

After literally hundreds of conversations with young people in care, and young adults who had aged out of care, some themes emerged. First and foremost, relationships matter. Young people express a deep desire for relationships with significant adults and with the community. Our kids want to be brought back into the fold of community life. They want to feel valued and capable, even on those rough days when they don’t believe it themselves. They want someone to call when they are scared or lonely or struggling to read a confusing statement from their insurance company. They want to feel significant in the decision-making that affects them. Young people are also very articulate about things adults do, or don’t do, that make them feel respected.

### **WHAT WORKS, WHAT IS IMPORTANT**

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Consistently, young people list the following adult behaviors as contributing to a respectful relationship with youth in care:

- listening carefully and asking relevant questions;
- sitting quietly while youth talk; knowing the youth's name; and
- not working on notes in one person's file while "talking" with another youth (Chalmers, 1996).

They want conversations with adults that do not focus exclusively on the youth's personal problems. Perhaps, they queried, someone might talk with them about their thoughts on world events or politics or foster care services or music or cooking or dogs. Anything besides their deep, personal "issues." The things "regular" people talk about with other "regular" people.

Growing Home searched for a holistic, strength-based model for practice to help demonstrate our mission, our understanding of the perspectives of youth in care, and the ways young people say they wish to be treated during their care experience. This search resulted in the agency embracing a model referred to as *The Circle of Courage* (Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 1990). *The Circle of Courage* is a model which combines established principles of youth development, attachment and positive parenting values and skills. The authors illustrated these core concepts on a Medicine Wheel, an essential image in American Indian cultures of North America. Notions of interdependence and connectedness are not unique to American Indian belief systems. They are core concepts in many spiritual and cultural perspectives. The four interrelated concepts, Belonging, Knowing, Becoming and Giving (Growing Home's adaptation of the terms used by Brendtro, et al.) bridge the gap from mission to practice by providing an easy-to-understand template for thinking about our work. Growing Home staff adapted the model, originally articulated for use in educational settings, to work with youth in care.

## SUCSESSES WE'VE HAD

A number of other significant things have transpired at Growing Home directly or indirectly because of the involvement of youth. We created a strengths-based assessment tool grounded in positive youth development and holistic practice, and recreated our Comprehensive Care Plans to reflect these values. We're committed to making opportunities for leadership and participation available to youth in our care, including national and

international conferences, participation in training of care providers and/or social workers, began a youth in care newsletter, and began to regularly include youth written materials into agency publications. Our Quality Assurance staff continues to explore ways to strengthen efforts to collect meaningful feedback from youth during care and after discharge. Growing Home's Board of Directors has begun to formulate systematic ways to gather stakeholder input, including youth in care.

We are especially proud of two publications written by youth in and from care, together with Growing Homes' Youth Development Director: *Finding Our Place: The Inside Story on Foster Care* and *Passages: A Journal for Growing Home*.

The writing of *Finding Our Place: The Inside Story on Foster Care* began when young people in/from care were asked "what are the things you wish someone had told you before you went into foster care?" Their responses became the basis of each section of the book, which is basically a guide for youth entering care. Young people responded with enthusiasm when presented with the opportunity to be part of creating *Finding Our Place* and to helping other youth going into care. We emphasized the expertise and experience of the youth working on the project. We encouraged them to see their experiences as learning and the things they have learned as opportunities to teach. Youth wrote or audio taped thoughts, poetry, and stories for the book. One young woman transcribed most of the eight hours of tape. Other youth helped with choosing content and editing sections. The result is an outstanding book, which is given as part of a Welcome Packet to every youth entering care with Growing Home. The book and packet include information on the rights of youth in care, stories by and about youth who are/were in care, information about how the system works and what they can expect from court or social workers. *Finding Our Place* is also sold to other agencies in other parts of the country for use with their youth. We are proud of the endorsement from the Manitoba Youth in Care Network, who is using *Finding Our Place* as a model for writing their own youth guide for youth in care throughout Canada. *Finding Our Place* provides information and helps build (international) community for youth in care.

*Passages: A Journal for Growing Home* is the most recent youth focused publication produced at Growing Home. *Passages* is a journal written by Growing Home's Youth Development Director after many, many conversations with youth about the experience of aging out of care. The journal provides a guide for youth to use together with a self-identified mentor. It leads the pair

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through experiences and conversations intended to build strengths in each of the four areas of the wheel within the context of community. A very special moment in the creation of *Passages* was in the experience of one young man from Northern Minnesota. John had been in quite a lot of trouble. He was in and out of detention and was rapidly approaching his eighteenth birthday, after which his offenses would be consequenced in a dramatically different way by the adult courts. John didn't interact much with the worker who was trying to support him in his transition to independent living. The author had an opportunity to meet John while *Passages* was still in draft form. John was presented with the opportunity to read through the transcript and provide edits or comments as he saw fit. A week later a large package arrived at the author's office. Inside was the product of 10 hours of John's editing on the *Passages* manuscript. His comments were incredibly thoughtful and made a significant difference in the quality of the finished journal. His worker reported that she had "never seen John so excited about anything." Upon receiving a copy of the published journal John immediately paged through and pointed out the changes he had recommended, and expressed great pride in seeing his advice utilized so concretely.

## CHALLENGES WE FACE

Integrating positive youth development efforts into our agency has been an exciting journey, which has also presented many challenges. Our staff has to learn to walk in two worlds. They are learning how to see youth as competent and as having potential, while also emphasizing problems enough to address important issues and to keep referral sources assured that we are attending to "fixing" problems and issues. Recently Growing Home hosted a visiting social worker from Australia who commented that in our strength-based work, staff at Growing Home is creating our own country with its own unique language, culture and customs. She was right. We spend a lot of time translating.

A vivid example of the translation issue came up a few years ago when the author wanted to bring a young woman to a conference to co-present on the experience of being in care. The audience was to be primarily care providers and social workers or administrators. Mary, at that time 19 years old, had been in more than fifty placements, including family foster care and institutional settings. In an effort to "protect" Mary from potentially being upset by the experience of talking at the conference, referring workers and other key people were very resistant to her request to participate. It was a major act of translation or reinterpretation to help the reluctant

professionals to consider the possibility that having the opportunity to teach others through her experiences was as likely to be empowering for Mary as it was to be traumatizing. In the end, the nervous professionals permitted her to present. Today, three years later, Mary has presented on her own at many conferences. She has been paid for many of her appearances, and has received a great deal of satisfaction as a result of these experiences. No, Mary's life isn't perfect. Her issues aren't all resolved, and she still occasionally has very bad days. Speaking at conferences did not fix Mary, but it has provided a positive component to a life that was otherwise intensely focused on managing her mental health issues.

Another challenge is the difficulty we sometimes face in identifying youth to participate in given opportunities. Often youth are simply not seen as having the capacity to participate in activities or events that would require appropriate public behavior and the capacity to share their knowledge. If an individual youth is viewed by social workers and/or care providers as particularly insightful or articulate, it is still uncommon to find adults actively trying to nurture those competencies in meaningful ways. Scheduling and transportation problems become a sticking point, sometimes in a reflection of the ambivalence of staff and/or care providers. A beautiful testimony to the power of using one's experience to teach others is the statement made by 17-year-old Joanie after she returned home from talking with a group of prospective adoptive parents. She and another youth in care spoke with the parents about what they might expect if they adopted an older youth that had been in foster care a long time. In writing a short article about the experience for Growing Home's newsletter, Joanie boldly proclaimed, "this is the bestest high I've ever given myself by doing something good for others."

Another significant challenge is getting "buy in" from individual staff and the system at large. "Empowered" youth are sometimes more difficult to "manage." Until agencies and out of home care providers create mechanisms to support genuine dialogue between youth and adults, the system of out of home care will continue to run much more smoothly as long as young adults resist their inclination to ask "why?" Many youth have developed institutionalized apathy. They believe they don't have any say, and that their words don't always have much impact on final decisions. The system is disrupted when youth begin to find their voices. When youth have others reminding them that they are survivors, wise and insightful with experiences to teach others, the system is destabilized. That's hard for adults. And for youth, because they run the risk of being kicked out of

placements if they are seen as being too challenging or disrespectful of adult authority.

Growing Home staff and care providers are committed to seeing the youth and families we help as much more than a collection of challenges, diagnoses or problems for which they are referred for Growing Home services. Instead, we believe that changed lives come from seeing and experiencing what is possible. Change seems possible when we focus on realizing our potential. We know that we need to spend at least as much time talking about capacity, contributions and connections as we do talking about problems, deficits and negative behavior.

*Listen to the MAYS child,  
Listen to the DOS  
Listen to the SHOULD'S  
The POSSIBLES, the WILLS  
Listen to the HAVES  
Then IT WILL BE EASIER  
FOR YOU TO BELIEVE THAT  
Anything can happen  
ANYTHING can be  
—SHEL SILVERSTEIN*

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