

Teens' Role Vital to Improving Foster Care Outcomes

By Betsy Krebs, Esq.

Teens in the foster care system have the potential and desire to be participating citizens and successful adults. Based on this fact, we founded the Youth Advocacy Center (YAC) and created the Getting Beyond the System® (GBS) Self-Advocacy Seminar model.

The GBS Seminar teaches important skills such as setting goals, learning strengths, finding mentors and other allies, and making self-advocacy presentations, which are vital for a youth to not get lost in the shuffle. Such help is critical when you consider some of the disturbing statistics for foster teens who age out of the system:

- Former foster youth make up 30% of the homeless and 25% of the prison population;
- 1/3 end up on public assistance within 15 months of leaving foster care; and
- In a study of 659 former foster youth between the ages of 20 and 33, less than 2% had a bachelor's degree or higher, versus 24% of the general population in that age group.

After years of representing teens and working in partnership with them on rights and advocacy projects, we saw the strengths of

“We’ve always believed that...teens need to be...partners in deciding what’s best for themselves.”

teens, and that they could become excellent advocates. But they were still leaving foster care without a secure plan for their future.

We were determined to use our background in law, advocacy, college education, and communications to create a model that would directly benefit teens by building on their strengths AND that professionals would replicate. To do that, we developed a program that allowed professionals to use their own expertise, creativity, and personal stories. That’s why we combined the key concepts of:

- *Self-advocacy*, which includes setting goals, analyzing facts and gathering missing information, presenting strengths, developing reasonable solutions, and making oral and written presentations;
- *Case method*, in which seminar youth analyze stories and

case studies in order to understand self-advocacy;

- *The Socratic Method*, in which facilitators of GBS are trained to ask questions to elicit responses from youth to develop their analytical and intellectual skills; and
- *Informational interviews*, in which each GBS student is matched with a leading professional in that youth’s field of interest. This gives the youth a chance to practice

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their skills and to build a network beyond the foster care system.

We see our role as bringing together the key players — teens, the professionals in the system, and the general community — and giving them the tools to work together. Our model empowers teens, gives professionals the tools to get teens to accept more responsibility for their futures, and it involves the community.

Teens' Role Crucial

The fact that these teens make the commitment to go into the program *themselves* (the program is recommended for youth ages 16-21) shows true determination to improve their lives. This is especially impressive when you consider the difficult backgrounds that some of these youth have. Our philosophy is that every young person must be held to high expectations and be given the opportunity to take responsibility for their actions.

Therefore, we require that GBS students only have one absence, and that they must complete homework and participate in class. Young people who might not ordinarily be expected to make this level of commitment thrive.

One young woman, who was pregnant when she entered GBS, only missed one class during the semester to have her baby, and then returned to complete the seminar successfully.

- The seminars run 2-1/2 hours per session, and are held once a week, for 12 weeks, after school hours.
- People from many backgrounds — law, social work, education, and youth work,

facilitate seminars. The important thing is that facilitators feel comfortable using the Socratic Method and believe the answers can come from the teens. They should also share YAC's philosophy that every teen deserves to learn skills to prepare for their futures.

YAC offers training workshops in New York City and other cities so that professionals from around the country can learn about the GBS approach, such as how staff and other adults can help teens develop a "future orientation" — and how they can use their own experiences to "normalize" the transition to adulthood.

Organizations can also partner with YAC to replicate the model. The GBS curriculum can also be purchased. Visit our website at www.youthadvocacycenter.org for details.

Summary

The Getting Beyond the System Self-Advocacy Seminar model was created and tested over the past five years, but many more years of experience went into it — working with teens, professionals, and with the broader community. Our goal from the beginning has been to improve the foster care system for teens. We've always believed that to do that, teens need to be "front and center" — partners in deciding what's best for themselves.

Betsy Krebs, Esq., J.D., is co-founder and executive director of the Youth Advocacy Center, a New York-based nonprofit, whose mission is to teach young adults in and at risk of foster care to advocate for themselves and take control of their lives. Ms. Krebs has led the development of YAC's program to help teens succeed through self-advocacy education for over 10 years. She has written numerous articles about self-advocacy and teens in foster care. She and Paul Pitcoff, Esq., YAC

CHILD WELFARE REPORT

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co-founder and director of education, are co-authors of "Beyond the Foster Care System: The Future for Teens," (Rutgers University Press). ■

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One Youth's View

Kendall Franklin, 19, is one of the Youth Advocacy Center's (YAC) success stories. Kendall, a graduate of the GBS Self-Advocacy Seminar, has interned at YAC for more than a year and has been an integral part of the agency's outreach efforts.

Kendall's future appears bright. He is living with his mom while attending Hunter College in New York City. He is currently a junior majoring in accounting at Hunter College. He'd like to pursue a career in business or working with youth.

Like other GBS graduates, Kendall's future wasn't always so promising. He lacked direction, and understood little about self-

advocacy when he enrolled in the GBS program in 2005.

"They (GBS facilitators) helped point us in a clearer direction," Kendall told *Child Welfare Report*. "I was ambitious, but I didn't know anything about goal setting, I didn't know how to get there."

Kendall also considers the self-advocacy component to be a vital part of where he's at today. "I've come to realize over the years that it isn't just career readiness, but you also need to advocate for yourself. As a shy person, I wasn't that good at advocacy. Before, I'd ask my mom what I should do. Now, I can ask for myself."

Kendall said it's the self-advocacy approach that makes GBS

unique from programs that focus on career aspirations only. "I would recommend it for anyone, regardless of their situation," he said.

Ebony, 18, another GBS graduate, also offered a glowing testimonial on the YAC's website (www.youthadvocacycenter.org). "I didn't know how to get started with my dream — not until I got to YAC," she stated. "Now I will graduate with a degree in business, and (I have) contacts in the industry. I know I'm able to overcome my past and start a great future."

"The class brought [my student] to a point where she realized that no one could do this for her, and that it was time for her to be accountable and take ownership for her actions," added Jennifer Begley, a GBS facilitator. ■

FUNDING ALERT

Nutrition & Development

Funding Source: Gerber Foundation

Eligibility: 501 (c) (3) nonprofits
Max. Grant Size: Projects requiring small grants (generally under \$50,000) are typically local in scope and impact, and therefore may not be within the scope of national funding initiatives. Large requests (greater than \$1 million annually) may exceed available foundation resources.

Deadline: June 1, 2007

Contact: For more information, go www.gerberfoundation.org/grantmaking_policies.htm

Description: Projects that improve infants' and young children's nutrition, care, and development.

Early Education

Funding Source: Rosie's For All Kids Foundation

Eligibility: 501(c)(3) nonprofits dedicated to helping low-income

children and their families through quality child care and early childhood education. First priority is given to experienced, community-based programs serving children in major low-income urban areas.

Max. Grant Size: \$15,000 to \$30,000

Deadline: Letters of intent are accepted on a rolling basis.

Contact: www.forallkids.org.

Description: Grants focus on tuition subsidies, small renovations, equipment upgrades, playground construction, and staff development opportunities.

Education

Funding Source: Pay It Forward Foundation

Eligibility: Schools, churches, and community youth groups (with an adult sponsor) may apply for funding. Youths or adults may write the application.

Max. Grant Size: \$500

Deadline: April 15, October 15, and January 15 of each year.

Contact: <http://payitforwardfoundation.org/educators/grant.html>.

Description: Pay It Forward Mini-Grants are designed to fund one-time-only service projects identified by youth as activities that would benefit their school, neighborhood, or community. ■

Funding Tips:

- Need funding ideas in 2007? Check out www.fedspending.org. The nonprofit watchdog OMB recently created this searchable database of more than \$12 trillion in annual federal government spending, including federal grants and contracts.
- In writing your proposal, avoid the use of qualifiers such as "might" or "could" with verbs. "Will" projects a sense of organizational clarity and confidence.

Segregation Issue Heating Up

The struggle to desegregate America's schools while ensuring equal educational opportunities for students of all races is one of the greatest social challenges the nation has faced over the last half-century.

While significant progress has been made since the Supreme Court's 1954 landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, thousands of schools around the country are still almost completely segregated.

In the coming months, the Court will again address the issue when it considers the constitutionality of "controlled choice" programs in Louisville and Seattle. These efforts, unlike the controversial busing of the 1960s and 1970s, are implemented without court intervention and allow parents a variety of school choices while still ensuring some degree of

racial integration.

Previous research provides relatively strong evidence that desegregation helps minority students reach higher academic achievement and better long-term outcomes such as college attendance and employment.

However, a new report issued by the Center for American Progress refutes this belief. Specifically, it finds that:

- African-Americans and Hispanics learn more in integrated schools. Minorities attending integrated schools also perform better in college and in the workforce.
- Controlled choice and other forms of desegregation benefit minority students.
- Racial integration is a rare case in which an educational policy appears to improve

educational equity at little financial cost.

These results have significant implications for the Supreme Court's upcoming decision. In the original *Brown* decision, a majority of the Court argued that considering race in school assignment was constitutional, partly because racial integration is an important part of the learning environment.

By demonstrating that *less* learning takes place in segregated schools, the results in this study support the contention that racial diversity is important to the learning environment. ■

Source: The Center for American Progress (www.americanprogress.org), a nonpartisan research and educational institute. To download the complete, "Lost Learning, Forgotten Promises" report, go to www.americanprogress.org/issues/2006/11/pdf/lostlearning.pdf.

Resources:

☎ **National Life Center Pregnancy Hotline**, (800) 848-5683

☎ **National Runaway Switchboard**, (800) 786-2929

☎ **Safe School Violence-Prevention Hotline**, (877) 723-3724

☎ **National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign**, (877) 543-7313

📖 **New Directions for Youth Development: The Case for Twenty-First Century Learning**, by Eric Schwarz and Ken Kay, ISSN: 1533-8916, Jossey-Bass, an Imprint of Wiley, www.jossey-bass.com. This volume addresses the skills and attributes that youth will need to succeed in the new global economy.

📖 **New Directions for Youth Development: Preparing Youth for the Crossing from Adolescence to Early Adulthood**, by Sam Piha and Georgia Hall, Jossey-Bass, www.jossey-bass.com. There is a growing concern that young people are increasingly unprepared for the challenges of adulthood. This volume examines what can be done.

📖 **If I Tell**, by Susan March-Webster and Emily Phillips, \$3.95, Kidsrights, www.kidsrights.com. This book is designed to help young sexual abuse victims understand the support they can experience if they tell and adult what has happened to them.

📖 **Buzz Heat**, by Marcus Brotherton, Multnomah Publishers, \$7 each, (541) 549-1144, or visit [\[books.com\]\(http://books.com\). These two books make the point-blank case that while drugs and sex can make youth feel great, the long-term effects of both can wipe out initial pleasure.](http://www.multnomah</p>
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📖 **Hold On to Your Kids**, by Gordon Neufeld, Ph.D., and Gabor Maté, M.D., Ballantine Books, www.randomhouse.com. The authors state that children need more direction in learning right from wrong, and for developing core values. They offer helpful advice on how to do just that.

📖 **An Unlit Path: One Family's Journey Toward the Light of Truth**, by Deborah Hannah, Xulon Press, www.xulonpress.com, ISBN: 1-60034-484-4. This book raises the awareness of the reader to the risks and rewards of adoption. ■

Study Reveals Big Impacts: Part II

Test-driven accountability is now the norm in public schools, as a result of the *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* Act.

For the past four years, the Center on Education Policy (CEP), an independent nonprofit research and advocacy organization, has been conducting comprehensive review of *NCLB*. In its latest report, CEP found 10 major effects that *NCLB* is having on schools. The following is a synopsis of the remaining effects. (The initial points were addressed in the January *CWR*):

- **Students are taking a lot more tests.**

This is correct. In 2002, 19 states had annual reading and math tests in grades 3-8 and once in high school. By 2006, every state had such testing. In the 2007-2008 school year, testing in science will be required under *NCLB*, although results need not be used for accountability requirements.

- **Schools are paying more attention to achievement gaps and the learning needs of particular groups of students.**

NCLB's requirement that schools be responsible for improving not only the academic achievement of students as a whole, but also the achievement of each subgroup of students, is directing additional attention to traditionally underperforming students, such as those from low-income families, ethnic and racial minorities, those who are learning English, and those with a disability.

States and school districts have consistently praised *NCLB*'s requirement that test data be broken up among subgroups of students, because it has helped bring to light the poor performance of students who

would have gone unnoticed if only general test data were considered.

However, states and districts have repeatedly identified testing and accountability provisions for students with disabilities and those learning English as problem areas. Educators have voiced frustration with requirements to give state exams to students with disabilities because, for those with cognitive impairments, the state test may be inappropriate and serve no instructional purpose.

Similarly, officials don't see the merit in administering an English language test to students who speak little or no English. Modifications have been made, but many educators feel these modifications haven't been enough.

- **The percentage of schools on state "needs improvement" lists has been steady, but is not growing.**

Over the past several years, there has been a leveling off in the number of schools not making adequate yearly progress (AYP) for at least two years. About 10% of all schools have been labeled as "in need of improvement" for not making AYP, although these are not the same schools every year.

Urban districts, however, report greater proportions of their schools in this category than suburban and rural districts. Earlier predictions had been that by this time there would be an extremely large number of schools not making AYP. A major reason for this stabilization stems from increasing test scores. In addition, states have been allowed to modify accountability so it's easier to make AYP.

- **The federal government is playing a bigger role in education than it did before *NCLB*.**

This is true. In CEP surveys for the last three years, states have judged *NCLB* enforcement as being strict or even very strict, even while changes in state accountability plans were being granted.

- ***NCLB* requirements have meant that state governments and school districts also have expanded roles in education, but often without adequate federal money to carry out their responsibilities.**

States are also taking a much more active role in public education, because they must carry out *NCLB* provisions that affect public schools. Because of testing requirements, local school districts must also assume more duties than before because of *NCLB*.

Overall, federal funding for *NCLB* has stagnated for several years. This is because provisions of the law resulted in a shift of funds so that, in 2005-2006, two-thirds of school districts nationwide received no increases or lost funds compared to the previous year.

Summary

NCLB is clearly having a major impact on public education. There is more testing and more accountability. Greater attention is being paid to what is being taught, and how it's being taught.

Yet, some provisions are causing persistent problems. Administrative burdens have increased and already tight financial pressures have been strained to the limit to meet *NCLB* requirements.

Congress has begun hearings on the effects of *NCLB* to prepare for its reauthorization in the new Congress that will meet this year. The key question is whether the strengths of this legislation can be retained while its weaknesses are addressed. ■

Source: "Ten Big Effects of the No Child Left Behind Act on Public Schools," by the Center on Education Policy (www.cep-dc.org). To download the complete report, go to www.cep-dc.org/nclb/NCLB-TenBigEffects.pdf.

Tapping into the Baby Boomer Generation

Despite the negative image of many adolescents and the perception that they are more influenced by peers than by adults, research consistently finds that most adolescents value positive relationships with parents, teachers, and other adults.

Research also shows that adolescents who have positive relationships with caring adults are more likely to thrive and less likely to engage in negative behaviors than adolescents who lack such relationships.

However, it's also well documented how many nonprofits struggle with finding enough people to donate their time to good causes. Are Baby Boomers being overlooked? Older adults represent a large pool of potential volunteers who can mentor, tutor, or otherwise help disadvantaged youth. While they may need to be encouraged to work with this group, Baby Boomers who are beginning to turn 60 have more free time as they are thinking of retiring or reducing their work hours.

Public/Private Ventures suggests that paid mentors should focus on the relatively small number of very high-risk children. But what about children who are at risk, but not at extremely high risk? They need positive relationships, too. **(Editor's note:** For more information about the P/PV study, see this month's *Teen Connections* insert.)

According to Child Trends, 30% of children between the ages of 6 and 17 — or approximately 15 million children — are from

medium-risk families. About another 6% (or 3 to 3.5 million children) are from very high-risk families. Fortunately, there are more than 73 million Baby Boomers who describe themselves as being in excellent to good health. This represents nearly four adults for every child between the ages of 6-17 in medium- and high-risk families.

Of course, this is not to say that all of these Boomers are willing to work with disadvantaged youth. Moreover, if the specific organization believes that volunteers need to be from the same race or ethnic group as the child, the pool of potential volunteers shrinks considerably. For example, there are six million black adults between 45 and 74 in good to excellent health. This represents just 1.2 black adults for every black child in medium- and high-risk families.

Fortunately, the wheel needn't be reinvented. Many existing programs, such as Across Ages, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, National One-to-One Mentoring Partnership, and Experience Corps, already focus on volunteers, including Baby Boomers, to work with disadvantaged youth.

While a good start, additional support for recruiting, screening, training, and working with Baby Boomers is needed to enable programs to take advantage of these potential volunteers. ■

Source: Kristin Anderson Moore, Ph.D., "Baby Boomers and Beyond: An Untapped Resource for Volunteers in Out-of-School Time Programs," *Child Trends* (www.childtrends.org).

Editor's Notebook

I'd like to briefly discuss some of the results from the recent reader surveys. First, thanks to those of you who took the time to fill one out. Second, it was reassuring to read that you find the three monthly inserts in *CWR* to be helpful.



We greatly appreciate the story suggestions, which included teen-related mental health issues, substance abuse solutions, foster care, and children and Internet safety.

We appreciate the feedback, and will strive to cover these and other important topics as much as space and time permit in 2007.

Switching gears, self-advocacy and mentoring are two reoccurring themes in this month's newsletter. Both are critical to helping foster and other disadvantaged youth.

Self-advocacy is a key part of the Youth Advocacy Center's groundbreaking program to assist youth about to "age out" of the foster care system. I thank General Strategic Marketing for making me aware of this program, and to Betsy Krebs and Kendall Franklin for taking the time to talk about this landmark program.

While self-advocacy is CRUCIAL, I believe that young people also need positive adult role models and relationships to become healthy and productive adults. Both Baby Boomers (see elsewhere this page) and faith-based volunteers (see this month's *Teen Connections*) offer vast potential to fill this crucial need. We sincerely hope both become reality. Until next month. ■

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Just What is 'At Risk' Anyway?

The term *at risk* is frequently used to describe children and youth and has a strong intuitive meaning. However, the term has no consistent definition and can be viewed as stigmatizing certain groups.

Nevertheless, this term is widely used. The positive side of this confusion is that program providers have some leeway in how they define "at risk." Despite this flexibility, it's still important to have a frame of reference for clear communication between providers, funders, policy makers, and the media about what "at risk" means.

Who is 'At Risk'?

Is it the child or adolescent? The family? The community?

Some would argue that *all children* are at risk in some way or another, while others stress that some children face much higher risks than other children. For example, children are seen as at risk if they have low self-esteem, have been abused, or have some sort of learning or other disability.

Alternatively, some contend that children shouldn't be seen as at risk — but rather the environment in which they develop. In this case, it could be said it's the *family* that's at risk. Poverty, single parenthood, and low parental education have regularly been found to undermine children's development.

A third approach would focus on the *community*, neighborhood, or school as an at-risk environment. For example, a low-income city with a high crime rate and a

"The term has no consistent definition and can be viewed as stigmatizing certain groups."

low high school graduation rate might be viewed as a community that puts children and teens at risk of poor outcomes.

What are Children 'At Risk' Of?

In this context, "at risk" is often used to refer to poor life outcomes. However, they are often very general, such as dropping out of school, economic dependency, or incarceration.

Afterschool programs, on the other hand, are likely to have more specific goals for "at-risk" chil-

dren, such as improving grades in school, delaying sexual behavior, or developing conflict resolution skills. Moreover, any given program is likely to have just one or two specific goals.

However, providers, funders, and others are likely to have different outcomes in mind when they think of a child as "at risk" of a "poor outcome." Put another way, a specific program may have a clear criteria of "at risk" and a specific goal in mind, while others are likely to have a broader definition. As a result, it's crucial for providers, funders, and others to be "on the same page" as to what constitutes a "poor life outcome."

Such understanding can help in developing programs and also in obtaining funding for them. ■

Source: Kristin Anderson Moore, Ph.D., "Defining the Term 'At Risk'" Child Trends. For the research brief, visit www.childtrends.org/Files/DefiningAtRisk.pdf.

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Finding Foster Families:

Empowerment is Important

Recruiting and retaining enough families to provide foster, kinship, and other out-of-home care is an ongoing challenge for child welfare agencies. How can they increase the number of resource families? How can these families be better supported?

Empowering Prospective Parents

Encouraging families to select a child is an important recruitment method. The more involved that prospective families are in the process, the more committed they will be to the child once they determine that they are a good match. This method personalizes children who need families, and recognizes that families are in the best position to know which children will fit best in their families.

To help prospective foster and adoptive parents make informed decisions, agencies should provide them with questions that might include:

- Where has the child been placed and for how long?
- What happened to the child's birth parents?
- Does the child have siblings in foster care or siblings who remain with their birth parents?
- Does the child have any special needs that require special educational, medical, or therapeutic interventions?
- Can I speak with someone who is currently caring for or who has cared for this child?

“The more involved that prospective families are in the process, the more committed they will be to the child.”

Using TV as a Recruiting Tool

Local television access is an often-overlooked recruitment tool. Arrange to start a regular child feature if your local TV station doesn't have such programming — and if your agency has access to children for whom TV publicity is appropriate.

It's likely that TV producers will appreciate the human interest value of such a project, the flexibility of using pre-taped segments, and the public goodwill that such features can generate for the station.

The Adoption Exchange in Colorado has been working with KCNC, a local CBS affiliate, on a weekly Wednesday's child feature since 1978. To date, KCNC has profiled more than 1,000 children.

Even more impressive, 75% of children featured have found adoptive families. Because the feature keeps the public aware of the need for foster and adoptive families, hundreds of children not featured have also joined permanent families.

Cable access programs is another avenue to consider. Cable companies are required by law to set aside channels for free com-

munity access programs. Anyone can submit a pre-recorded tape to the station or produce a show.

Need training? For a small fee, most community access stations offer classes about operating cameras and other equipment needed to make a show or produce a public service announcement (PSA). Stations dole out time slots for shows on a first-come, first-served basis.

Summary

In a nutshell, effective recruitment of foster and adoptive parents should include innovative methods; TV being just one of the possibilities.

Regardless of the specific method used, successful recruiting needs to provide prospective foster or adoptive parents with increasingly detailed information as they move forward. Such information empowers prospective parents to be the “experts” on their families. ■

*Sources: At the time of this writing, Madelyn Freundlich and Sarah Gerstenzang were working at Children's Rights in New York City (www.childrensrights.org); North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC). **Editor's note:** This article originally appeared in the February 2005 CWR.*

@look ahead

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- Racial Disparities;
- Choosing the Right Family Assessment Tool;
- Parenting a Dishonest Child.