

Strong Center for Developmental Disabilities

To Dos and Takeaways

Person Centered Thinking and Planning in Foster Care Training

Person-Centered Thinking

Think about it like putting on a new pair of glasses. Through these glasses you can see the five principles of person-centered thinking:

- **Choices:** Decisions that the young person can make and helping them learn to make more choices in his or her life.
- **Community:** The importance of positive participation in the community using their strengths and interests. The person is a valued member of the community.
- **Flexibility:** The young person has flexibility in when, where, how, and with whom he or she interacts
- **Goals:** These are based on the young person's strengths, preferences, desires, and needs.
- **Changes:** The person's participation in all planning around their life and their ability to make changes to these plans.

Looking at the world through person-centered glasses takes some practice and while you are learning, it will be helpful to discuss different scenarios with your colleagues and supervisors.

Choices

Choices can be something small like what to wear or what to have for lunch. Or bigger, like where to live or where I want to work. It's important to work on some of the smaller decisions and get good at those before it comes time to make some of the bigger ones....

Recommendation: Make a pro and con list when I am trying to make an important choice.

Remember: The young person is the expert in his or her own life – no one else has had the same experiences and can know exactly how he or she feels or what he or she would choose. It's important to have a chance to make choices every day! Sometimes he or she will do a good job making choices and sometimes not, but the young person will always learn something.

Dignity of risk means that we should all have the same opportunities to fail; often the things that might be the biggest failures if things don't go our way might also be the biggest successes if things do go our way. Young people have the right to take these risks, as long as they have the information they need to make an *informed choice* (having all of the information about what might happen if they fail and what alternatives there are).

Community

Who is in your community? Our communities are made up of people who we see every day or on a regular basis. They could be people that live nearby like neighbors, people you see regularly at the local coffee shop, or people from a place like church. Families can also be a part of your community. Every person is different, so usually they have a unique community that surrounds them. In today's world of computer-based socializing it has become harder to make connections with real people in our communities.

People need to get to know each other to begin to like and care about each other. People who spend a lot of time together and share interests begin to care about each other as friends. That kind of caring is the beginning of community. Some things that friends do for one another are: having fun going out, helping while a person is sick or sad, and making sure a person is ok.

Flexibility

Everyone has different ways of doing things. Some people are “morning people” while others are “night owls.” Some people like to spend time with other people and others are content to spend time alone. Some people like to go to loud, exciting places, while others prefer quiet, laid-back places. ***Just like we as adults like certain things, young people who are in the child welfare system also have things they like and don’t like.*** When possible, it’s important to let them decide where to go, at what time, and who is going to be there.

It is not an easy thing sometimes for adults to change how we do something or even see that it might be different for a young person. Getting to know a young person’s likes and dislikes so that you can be as flexible as possible to honor their preferences is an important part of person-centered thinking.

Goals

It’s hard sometimes for young people to see that they can make plans and work toward making those plans happen. Youth in the child welfare system are used to people letting them down and not following through. They need to be taught that they can and should make plans and expect good things in their lives. There are lots of plans and paperwork written ***for*** the young person, but not necessarily ***with*** them. Getting their input then helping them work toward their goals can create confidence and hope to strive toward more goals.

But where can we start? *We start where the young person is.* What does that mean? Ask them questions and show a genuine interest in their answers. Spend time with them. If we cannot spend time ourselves, help them meet a mentor or connect with another positive adult who will help them see what life could be like beyond the child welfare system.

Also, it’s important to ask not just “what” a young person wants to do, but also “why” in order to discover those hidden opportunities to help them get what they want. Perhaps there is another way to get what they want that can be brainstormed by the team! We all make assumptions based on our past experiences all the time. Taking a few minutes to explore what things mean for the young person can clear up misunderstandings, help the young person feel more heard, and help the whole team make decisions together that will help the person learn and grow in ways ***they*** want.

Remember: A lot of people would like to get paid for working on something they love, but there are just not many jobs in some highly competitive areas like singing, skateboarding, etc. Young people should not be discouraged from pursuing careers in these areas, but rather, adults and mentors should help them make back-up plans in case they cannot make a living in those fields. Some people also use these areas as hobbies and still do them outside of their regular jobs. It’s all about balancing needs with wants.

Changes

Young people in care may often want different things that we as adults want. They may change their minds and make things difficult for any people who are trying to plan ***for*** them. Instead, plan ***with*** them. ***Make a commitment to encourage them to speak their dreams and help them use their strengths to get there.*** If you have a reason why you as an adult think they should or should not do something, find a way to explain it to them in a way they would understand. You both will likely learn from this experience by listening and beginning to see the world in different ways!

The Person-Centered Planning Process

Choices

Involve young person in deciding when the meeting will be, where it will take place, and who else should be invited. Meetings can be very long if all the topics are discussed at the same meeting. Consider breaking up the material into several meetings.

Preparation

Discuss with the young person how he or she wants the meeting to go. This will dictate what materials you need to bring along. Person-centered planning meetings often involve the use of flipchart paper and markers. If the person is uncomfortable with this process, someone can take notes on a computer or paper. Sometimes it is helpful to have snacks for the participants as well.

Create a checklist of simple materials you might need. For example, a flipchart with markers or a computer to record the information.

Talking Points

Discuss the content of what the meeting will be about with the person. Prepare them for the questions they may face. There are [workbooks](#) that could be helpful in preparing the person for the meeting or they could be filled out during the meeting.

The following topics are suggested for discussion at this and future person-centered planning meetings until the plan is complete. The plan will also be updated on a regular basis.

- Background: Your history like the places you have lived and people you have been close to.
- Relationships: Family, Friends, Teachers/Mentors, and Service Providers.
- Schedule: Describes what you do now and what you would do on a “perfect day”.
- Places: Where do you go in the community for fun (clubs, churches, synagogues or mosques, youth groups, etc.) and for appointments (doctors, dentists, counselors, etc.)?
- Personal Preferences: What you like, don't like, or don't know if you like in terms of items or activities.
- Dreams, hopes, and worries about the future.
- Health: Things that lead to good health and things that lead to poor health.
- Home, Work and School: What works and what doesn't work at home, work, and school?

The Plan

From all the information, what things are most important to you? These can be added as goals in your plan at school and home. Once you have goals, be sure you know what steps you will need to take to reach your goals and how **you** can keep moving towards your goals (or who to talk with to get things moving!).

Potential Conflict

Be prepared for disagreement. Redirect the desires of the person while problem-solving alternate solutions.

Moving the Plan Forward

Tips for Working on Goals

Remember that each person is a unique individual with unique circumstances. These ideas are to get you thinking, but you may need to do some brainstorming with the young person to come up with your own creative solutions!

Independent Living Goals ([See SCDD's Individualized Skill-Building Tip Sheet](#))

Make sure that the young person's skills are assessed so that you know what the young person is good at and what they need some extra help with. A potential tool is the [Casey Life Skills assessment](#), which is available online for free.

Some things to work on include

- Getting out into the community to meet people, use social skills, and see what the young person likes.
- Making choices.
- Developing goals for everyday life. These are things like new habits.
- Health including healthy eating, coping with stress, healthy sexuality, understanding healthcare, and medical/diagnoses awareness.

Finding and maintaining

- Education (this can include hobbies or further education like college)
A job or career
- A place to live
- A stable money situation
- Ways to get around the community via bike, car, public transportation, etc.
- Safety (keeping my door locked, being out in groups at night (instead of alone), etc.)

Practice, Practice, Practice

When working on skills, remember that practice is very important, especially for young people with disabilities or learning differences. It's important to remember that with some young people, skills do not transfer well to other situations or environments. If you are teaching new skills, you can practice by

- Getting Help at Home: Enlist the assistance of the foster parent or residential staff person to help teach in the home.
- Getting Help at School: Check with the school to see if there are opportunities for the young person to learn these skills there.
- Role Playing or Getting Out There: Think about where the skills will be needed and either role play different situations, or better yet, go into the community and use the skills where they will be needed!

Community Connections

The following are tips for making and keeping community connections:

- Assess and teach social skills so youth are able to work on making and keeping appropriate connections. For some young people with disabilities, they might have difficulty making the connections or keeping them.
- Keeping friends may require teaching specifically about boundaries that you may or may not take for granted. Boundaries are the things they should and should not do based on social norms. For example, if the young person calls or sends messages their friend too often or if they send something their friend finds offensive, the friend may reject them and their relationship may not continue. This is complex and may require special input from a therapist or other professional.

- If the young person does not have many family or community members to support them, the team should look at ways to connect them with the community such as
 - Mentoring programs.
 - Community-based interest groups (at community centers, faith-based organizations, museums, etc.) For anyone interested, there is most likely a group in the community.
 - Family Finding, a process that looks for extended family members.
 - Connecting with older siblings who have already aged out of foster care.
 - Encouraging giving back to community by volunteering their time to help others. This can help build their social networks and their resumes!
- A good resource for formalizing relationships as a young person transitions to adulthood are permanency pacts, which are available on the website of a national group called Foster Club. Permanency Pacts can be used to help make sure that the youth has older adults to count on as they transition to adulthood.

The End... or Just the Beginning?

Remember: Finishing a person-centered plan is not the “end.” It really is the beginning of new opportunities for a young person to explore what they want for their lives. Revisit person-centered plans or workbooks regularly to make sure the goals still apply and plans keep moving in the direction a young person wants! We all change and grow. Keep helping young people in foster care do the same!

Did You Know?

The following is the information and links in the training's "Did you know?" sections.

- **History:** Person-centered planning is more than 25 years old and includes many different practices by different thought leaders. People like Beth Mount, John O'Brien, and Michael Smull to name a few, have been instrumental in advocating for people with disabilities and assisting them with learning to advocate for themselves.

Resource: [A brief overview of the methodologies of these and other person-centered planning leaders.](#)

- **Self-Determination:** This means being able to make decisions about life. It is a skill that can be learned, but it takes some time and experiences. It's important to learn how to be informed about the risks and alternatives to the choices.

Resource: [Learn about ways to build self-determination skills and the ability to make informed choices.](#)

- **Dignity of Risk:** Making choices and living with the consequences of those choices, whether good or bad, is an experience that many people with disabilities are protected or shielded from. In addition, young people in foster care are shielded from opportunities to take make choices based upon the rules and laws that regulate their living situation. However, by protecting young people from these opportunities to make choices, we are not allowing them to learn the lessons that come from winning and/or losing. Young people have to be given dignity to take the risks, "but with a clear understanding of the possible harmful consequences of one's actions. Having said this, it is the responsibility of advocates, caregivers, and professionals to assist individuals... in coping effectively with the possible consequences of such actions."

Resource: [Self-Determination in Adults: A Practice Guide \(2011\)](#)

- **Choices:** Young people in the child welfare system are used to being told what to do and not being allowed to make choices. A good place to start to work on choice making might be a discussion of their rights. The [NYS Bill of Rights for Children and Youth in Foster Care](#), should be discussed, giving examples and talking about meaning as needed so that the young person understands how these rights apply to their lives. All rights restrictions must be assessed and documented. Rights restrictions can impede normalcy and go against the reasonable and prudent parenting standard. The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families act states "States must implement a 'reasonable and prudent parent standard' allowing foster parents to make more day-to-day decisions for youth in their care." (Section 111)

- **Goals:** There are some good tips to making some goals on the [Teens Health Website](#). According to the site, you should make sure to take the following into account:

- Specific, realistic goals work best.
- It takes time for a change to become an established habit.
- Repeating a goal makes it stick.
- Pleasing other people doesn't work.
- Roadblocks don't mean failure.

- **Supported Decision-Making:** We all need help with things in our lives, or there would not be people who specializing in repairing things that most of us cannot (e.g. car repair people or those in the building trades), or people who provide services to help us look our best (e.g. hairdressers/barbers). Many of us also don't make decisions, especially big ones like where to live and what type of car to buy, without consulting friends and loved ones. "How would you feel if you had no say in where you live? Or where you work? Or who you spend time with? Or what you can buy and spend money on? That's what can happen to older adults and people with disabilities when someone else has the power to make decisions for them, like when they're put in a guardianship" (National Resource Center for Supported Decision-Making). An alternative to

having a guardian for young people who need some help with decision making, supported decision-making is a process where people enlist their loved ones and trusted professionals who know them to help them make choices. This is mostly a movement in the developmental disability field, but tools and the process could be helpful for all young people who need to learn to make choices.

Resource: See the [National Resource Center for Supported Decision-Making website](#) for tools to use to help young people make choices.

○ **Person-Centered Planning Resources and Workbooks**

Resource: [Tools for person-centered planning.](#)

○ **Youth Participation:** Getting a youth to participate in a meeting full of adults may be difficult. Here are some tips:

- Prior to going to the meeting, find out what topics will be discussed, and talk about these things with the young person in a safe environment with a trusted adult.
- Encourage and assist them to make a PowerPoint or other creative project about their point of view regarding the topics. Sometimes young people do this for their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting for their schools and it gives the adults a different view of the young person.
- Have that trusted adult accompany them to the meeting and encourage them gently to contribute their thoughts.
- Speak in terms that the young person can understand. Avoid jargon and acronyms.
- Plan to work for the timeframe that the young person will be engaged. If the meeting is too long they might get tired and not be willing or able to participate.
- If the young person does not want to have this meeting, respect their decision, but try to work slowly on one of the [workbooks or person-centered tools](#).
- Read some [tips for being more youth-led as an organization](#).

○ **Youth in Transition:** The Child Welfare Information Gateway has a fact sheet that is a great primer for foster parents about a young person's transition to adulthood. On page 9, there is a tip sheet about building supportive relationships, which is something that can help a young person immensely before, during, and after transition.

Resource: [Helping Successful Transition to Adulthood](#)

