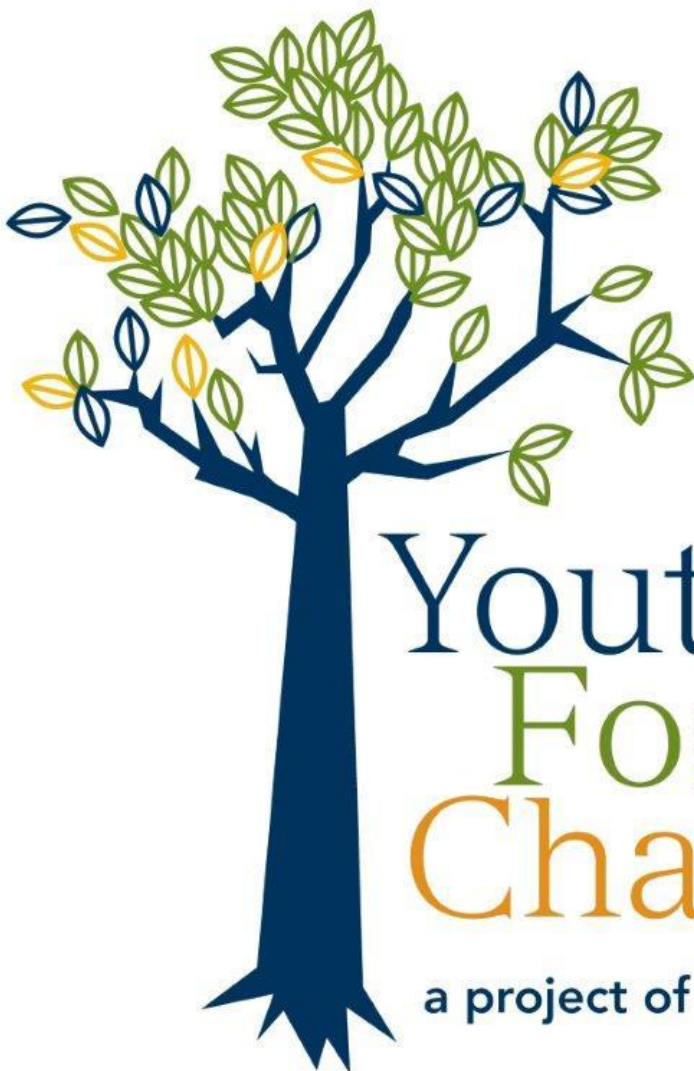


**A PATH TO UNDERSTANDING:**

**A YOUTH-DEVELOPED GUIDE TO PROMOTE BETTER  
COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN  
YOUTH AND THEIR CASEWORKERS AND CAREGIVERS**



Youth  
Fostering  
Change

a project of Juvenile Law Center



## INTRODUCTION

This guide was created by Juvenile Law Center's Youth Fostering Change Youth Advocates to improve relationships between youth and their caseworkers and caregivers in the child welfare system. As Youth Advocates, we are young people who are currently in care or have previously been in care, and we want adults to understand that we are more than just youth in the child welfare system; we are like every other teenager and young adult. Sometimes our behaviors are a reflection of the fact that we are growing up and going through difficult times. This Guide is intended to remind adults that the behaviors that may be interpreted as "disrespectful," "irresponsible," or "bad," are sometimes just a sign that we are busy, overwhelmed, or distracted. Hopefully, these tips will help improve the relationship between youth and their caseworkers and caregivers.



# YOUTH AVOIDING WORKER/CAREGIVER

## DODGING PHONE CALLS FROM WORKER OR CAREGIVER; AVOIDING WORKER OR CAREGIVER

<b>Common misunderstanding</b>	<b>What might this behavior really mean?</b>
<p>That something is wrong.</p> <p>That the youth is careless or irresponsible.</p> <p>That the youth is not comfortable speaking with the adult.</p> <p>That the youth does not care about what happens with his/her case.</p>	<p>The youth may be tired of being reminded that he/she is in care and required to attend so many meetings. The youth may just want to feel like a normal teenager.</p> <p>The youth may not like talking on the phone.</p> <p>The youth may be overwhelmed or in a bad mood for other reasons.</p>

# YOUTH AVOIDING WORKER/CAREGIVER

## DODGING PHONE CALLS FROM WORKER OR CAREGIVER; AVOIDING WORKER OR CAREGIVER

<b>What responses/ interventions are ineffective?</b>	<b>What responses/ interventions do youth prefer?</b>
<p>Persistent calling or nagging (if a youth does not want to talk to the worker, calling over and over again is not going to change that, and may actually worsen the relationship).</p> <p>Punishing the youth (taking away privileges for not responding to communication attempts will not make the youth more inclined to speak to the worker in the future).</p> <p>Disappearing or dropping out of the youth's life without notice or explanation – this will give the youth the impression that you have given up on him/her.</p>	<p>Explaining to the youth why it is important that the worker and the youth communicate.</p> <p>Asking the youth the best way of getting in touch – phone, email, or text.</p> <p>Instead of calling repeatedly, texting the youth and explaining why you need to talk to him/her, if the youth has indicated a preference for texting.</p> <p>Asking if there is anything you can do to make things better or communication more effective.</p> <p>Explaining the purpose of meetings beforehand (at the time you request them).</p>

# WITHDRAWN OR UNRESPONSIVE YOUTH

**BEING SHY AND WITHDRAWN; NOT RESPONDING TO QUESTIONS OR CONVERSATIONS OR SAYING “WHATEVER” OR “NOTHING”**

**→REFUSING TO TALK ABOUT HIS/HER PAST**

**→SPENDING TIME ALONE; NOT WANTING TO CONNECT WITH ANYONE; ACTING STANDOFFISH**

<b>Common misunderstanding</b>	<b>What might this behavior really mean?</b>
<p>That the youth does not care about his/her situation.</p> <p>That the youth is antisocial or is developmentally delayed.</p> <p>That the youth is sneaky or has a hidden agenda.</p> <p>That the youth needs to be around more people.</p> <p>That the youth feels like he/she already knows everything.</p>	<p>The youth may prefer to be with his/her friends or doing something else instead of having another meeting.</p> <p>The youth may have a shy personality or it may take him/her longer to open up to new people.</p> <p>There may be something else on the youth’s mind; the youth may be worried. The youth may be scared and afraid that he/she is being, or will be, judged.</p> <p>The youth may have been hurt by people in the past whom he/she thought that he/she could trust. The youth may be tired of explaining his/her story to so many different people who he/she thinks may not care about him/her.</p> <p>The youth may be scared to let anyone else into his/her life because he/she is afraid that they will leave.</p> <p>The youth may have a hard time talking about sensitive and painful issues or memories.</p>

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<b>What responses/ interventions are ineffective?</b>	<b>What responses/ interventions do youth prefer?</b>
<p>Constantly asking if there is something wrong or stating that there is a problem.</p> <p>Making decisions about the youth without asking for his/her input.</p> <p>Ignoring what the youth has to say.</p> <p>Talking around—to co-workers or the youth’s caregivers—about the youth’s perceived unwillingness to communicate.</p> <p>Forcing the youth to be around a lot of strangers or people.</p> <p>Continuing to talk at the youth in meetings or over the phone without checking to see if the youth understands what you are saying.</p>	<p>Being patient.</p> <p>Giving the youth time to open up—as long as he/she needs.</p> <p>Taking time to get to know the youth—building a relationship that shows the youth that you care about him/her outside of your professional role in his/her life.</p> <p>Taking time to answer any question the youth has for you about his/her situation. Trying to use language that is familiar to the youth.</p> <p>Making positive suggestions about how to connect with people.</p> <p>Becoming someone the youth can talk to and trust.</p> <p>If the youth seems unwilling or unready to talk, letting him/her know that you are going to drop it for now, but that he/she can contact you if he/she wants to talk at a later time.</p>

# YOUTH “ACTING OUT”

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## TRYING NEW ACTIVITIES AND TRYING TO HANDLE FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY (BEING REBELLIOUS, EXPERIMENTAL, ADVENTUROUS); RISKY BEHAVIOR

→TALKING BACK; LASHING OUT (I.E. IN MEETINGS OR AT HOME)

→BREAKING RULES OR BEING NON-COMPLIANT (BREAKING CURFEW, SKIPPING CLASS, BREAKING HOUSE OR GROUP HOME RULES, ETC.)

→ACTING IMPULSIVELY AND ON INSTINCT

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<b>Common misunderstanding</b>	<b>What might this behavior really mean?</b>
<p>That the youth is a bad kid.</p> <p>That the youth is out-of-control, wild, or troubled.</p> <p>That the youth is “grown” and should be held responsible.</p>	<p>This may be the youth’s way of getting attention.</p> <p>The youth may just be learning to try to find his/her way—to test his/her surroundings. The behaviors may be a typical part of the youth’s maturation and development.</p> <p>The youth may be receiving guidance and advice from the wrong people because he/she lacks a positive mentor or role model.</p> <p>The youth may be angry because he/she feels like no one understands or listens to him/her.</p> <p>The youth may be desiring the freedoms that his/her peers who are not in care experience.</p>



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**→ACTING IMPULSIVELY AND ON INSTINCT**

<b>What responses/ interventions are ineffective?</b>	<b>What responses/ interventions do youth prefer?</b>
<p>Punishing the youth by taking away his/her privileges or creating more rules that the youth will inevitably break.</p> <p>Criticizing the youth for making certain choices.</p> <p>Making assumptions about what you think the youth is doing or why he/she is making certain choices.</p> <p>Giving up on the youth.</p>	<p>Responding in a non-judgmental way without assumptions about why the youth made the choice he/she made.</p> <p>Allowing the youth to explain what happened as opposed to assuming the youth’s motives for acting a certain way.</p> <p>Seeing if the youth would feel more comfortable talking in another location that he/she has chosen.</p> <p>Asking the youth whether he/she feels that he/she is safe—transforming the conversation from one about consequences to one about the youth’s safety. Working with the youth to set appropriate and clear boundaries.</p> <p>Giving the youth advice about making healthy choices, but not assuming that you know everything that is going on with him/her. Where appropriate, directing the youth to appropriate resources.</p> <p>Explaining the consequences of certain behaviors clearly to the youth.</p>

# YOUTH “NEEDING” MONEY

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## ASKING FOR MORE MONEY

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<b>Common misunderstanding</b>	<b>What might this behavior really mean?</b>
<p>That the youth probably wants to use the money for something unnecessary or illegal.</p> <p>That the youth is irresponsible.</p> <p>That the youth is greedy.</p> <p>That the youth gets enough money and should learn to budget.</p>	<p>The youth may not be receiving the money entitled to him/her from his/her caregiver.</p> <p>The youth may need money for normal teenage recreational activities.</p> <p>The youth just wants to feel like a normal teenager.</p> <p>The youth may feel bad about being left out from activities because the youth lacks the resources to participate.</p> <p>Like for any teenager, style matters—the youth may just want to purchase clothing or other accessories that make him/her feel included, secure, and confident.</p>

# YOUTH “NEEDING” MONEY

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## ASKING FOR MORE MONEY

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<b>What responses/ interventions are ineffective?</b>	<b>What responses/ interventions do youth prefer?</b>
<p>Assuming you know why a youth needs more money.</p> <p>Criticizing the youth for wanting to purchase new clothes or accessories.</p> <p>Holding the youth in the system to a different standard than he/she would be held to in a “normal” family.</p> <p>Saying “no” without giving a reason.</p>	<p>Finding out how much money the youth needs and for what.</p> <p>Having an honest conversation with the youth about budgeting; even youth who like to spend money on material items want to acquire budgeting skills.</p> <p>Connecting with the youth’s caregiver to strategize about ways to help the youth earn extra money.</p> <p>Being clear with the youth about why you cannot give him/her more money.</p>

# YOUTH WANTS TO LEAVE CARE

## THE YOUTH CONSTANTLY SUGGESTS HE/SHE WANTS TO LEAVE CARE

<b>Common misunderstanding</b>	<b>What might this behavior really mean?</b>
<p>That the youth does not know what is best for him/her.</p> <p>That the youth should be discharged as soon as possible.</p>	<p>The youth might not be able to see yet how being in care can help him/her.</p> <p>The youth may be frustrated with all of the rules of being in care.</p> <p>The youth may not have had anyone helping him/her to think through what leaving care would mean, or how he/she would get access to certain resources.</p>

# YOUTH WANTS TO LEAVE CARE

## THE YOUTH CONSTANTLY SUGGESTS HE/SHE WANTS TO LEAVE CARE

<b>What responses/ interventions are ineffective?</b>	<b>What responses/ interventions do youth prefer?</b>
<p>Telling the youth that they must stay in care without any context or reasons.</p> <p>Allowing the youth to discharge without explaining the benefits of staying in care.</p>	<p>Explaining how staying in care can help a youth.</p> <p>Describing the resources available to a youth in care.</p> <p>Brainstorming with the youth where he/she will live, how he/she will get money, food, and other resources, if no longer in care.</p> <p>Helping the youth find someone on whom he/she can depend.</p>

# YOUTH/CAREGIVER DISPUTES

## FREQUENT DISPUTES BETWEEN THE YOUTH AND CAREGIVER

<b>Common Misunderstanding</b>	<b>What might this behavior really mean?</b>
<p>That the youth is a bad kid.</p> <p>That the underlying conflict was the youth's fault.</p> <p>That the youth has anger management problems.</p> <p>That the youth was poorly raised by his/her family.</p>	<p>There may be some level of unfairness in the household that the youth experiences, like unbalanced discipline practices.</p> <p>There may be a lack of communication between the caregiver and youth.</p> <p>The youth may not understand the rules or expectations of the household.</p> <p>The youth may be frustrated with being in care, and taking out his/her frustration on the person he/she lives with.</p>

# YOUTH/CAREGIVER DISPUTES

## FREQUENT DISPUTES BETWEEN THE YOUTH AND CAREGIVER

<b>What responses/ interventions are ineffective?</b>	<b>What responses/ interventions do youth prefer?</b>
<p>Assuming that the youth wants to be moved just because there is a conflict in the home.</p> <p>Taking sides or acting in a way that would indicate that you are taking sides.</p> <p>Letting on that you believe that the adult's version of the story to be more credible.</p>	<p>Uncovering the root cause of the in-home conflict.</p> <p>Always getting the youth's perspective on the situation (typically, when a youth is comfortable, he/she will speak openly and honestly).</p> <p>In order to make a youth feel comfortable, taking him/her out into the community, away from the home, to a space where he/she feels at ease and safe.</p> <p>Using Youth Fostering Change's <i>Teen Success Agreement</i> (available at <a href="http://www.jlc.org/yfc">www.jlc.org/yfc</a> or by emailing <a href="mailto:yfc@jlc.org">yfc@jlc.org</a>).</p>

This guide was created by members of the 2013-2014 Youth Fostering Change Program: Bern. A, Breyonna C., Kaliyah H., Deionni M., Jasmine M., Larbriah M., Bruce M., Tysharee M., Christopher R., Karima S., and Tevin S.

This guide was designed by Bern Anderson and the Youth Engagement Staff.

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If you have any questions about this Guide or Youth Fostering Change, you can contact Juvenile Law Center at 215-625-0551 or email [yfc@jlc.org](mailto:yfc@jlc.org).