# Having the Normalcy Conversation: A Guide for Discussing Developmentally Appropriate Services for Children, Youth, and Young Adults in Foster Care

Capacity Building
CENTER FOR STATES

## Introduction

State child welfare agencies are responsible for promoting the healthy development and well-being of the children and youth in their care. To achieve healthy development, children and youth in foster care need to be involved in normal and developmentally appropriate extracurricular and social experiences and provided opportunities for safe risk taking. This guide is intended to support child welfare professionals in having "normalcy conversations"—that is, structured discussions and planning sessions among key stakeholders on how to promote normal and developmentally appropriate experiences in foster care. The guide begins with a brief description of the importance of normalcy for children and youth in care and presents legislative requirements for a "reasonable and prudent parent standard"[1] to promote normalcy. The guide continues with guidance for facilitating a normalcy conversation, including essential dialogue topics, key stakeholders to involve in discussions about normalcy, and tips for promoting a productive conversation.

## Defining Normalcy

Normalcy refers to allowing youth in out-of-home care to experience childhood and adolescence in ways similar to their peers not in foster care. This includes opportunities to participate in activities and experiences such as:

- After-school clubs and sports
- Recreational and community activities
- School field trips
- Sleepovers
- Social media
- Part-time jobs
- Driver's education
- Choice in personal style
- Cultural and religious expression

1 "Reasonable and prudent parent standard" is a term used in Federal and State legislation that refers to practical decision-making of foster parents and other caregivers to allow children and youth in foster care to participate in healthy and developmentally appropriate activities. The concept of "normalcy" is used throughout this document to reflect the legislative intent of implementing a reasonable and prudent parent standard.

## The Importance of Normalcy for Children and Youth in Foster Care

In the past, State child welfare agencies focused primarily on safety and protection and often restricted activities for youth in care. The exclusion of youth from activities enjoyed by their classmates and peers was not only stigmatizing, but also deprived youth of valuable learning opportunities. Today, the critical importance of social and emotional well-being and the essential role of normalcy and developmentally appropriate opportunities for children and youth in care are increasingly recognized.

While the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program has done much to promote independent living skills among youth in care, research on outcomes tells us that the traditional approach to building life skills has often fallen short of sufficiently preparing young people for successful life after foster care. In addition, the latest research on adolescent brain development confirms that teenagers' experiences ultimately shape their adult development. These findings underscore the importance of normal adolescent enrichment experiences through which youth learn decision-making and coping skills and have opportunities to develop healthy relationships that can contribute to cognitive, social, and emotional development.[2]

> *"The need to provide, protect, and promote normalcy in foster care is necessary to ensure the overall well-being of youth, alter their trajectory, and improve their outcomes."*
>
> — Center for States Young Adult Consultant

A culture shift that values a normal experience for children and youth in foster care requires an infrastructure that reinforces a reasonable standard of providing foster care. Foster parents and other care providers should have decision-making authority as prudent parents to help achieve normalcy for the children and youth placed in their care and to cultivate opportunities for safe risk-taking and decision-making.

## Legislation on Normalcy and the Reasonable and Prudent Parent Standard

The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (P.L. 113–183),[3] signed into law on September 29, 2014, includes provisions to expand opportunities for children and youth in foster care to experience normal development. The law requires State child welfare agencies to allow caregivers to use a "reasonable and prudent parent standard" when determining whether a child in foster care can participate in extracurricular, enrichment, cultural, and social activities. The standard is characterized by careful and sensible parental decision-making that maintains a child or youth's health, safety, and best interests while at the same time encouraging his or her emotional and developmental growth.

To comply with P.L. 113–183, State child welfare agencies are now required to have policies and procedures in place that empower foster parents and other designated caregivers to make decisions allowing youth in foster care to participate in developmentally appropriate activities. These activities may vary in accordance with State laws.

---

2 Harper Browne, C. (2014). *Youth Thrive: Advancing healthy adolescent development and well-being*. Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Social Policy.

3 https://www.congress.gov/113/plaws/publ183/PLAW-113publ183.pdf

The law requires that State title IV-E agencies implement the following provisions related to the reasonable and prudent parent standard and normalcy; State licensing authorities must:

- Permit the use of the reasonable and prudent parent standard in foster family homes and child care institutions
- Certify that foster parents have skills and knowledge relating to the reasonable and prudent parent standard, including knowledge and skills relating to the developmental stages of the cognitive, emotional, physical, and behavioral capacities of a child, and to the application of the standard to decisions such as whether to allow the child to engage in extracurricular, enrichment, cultural, and social activities
- Require child care institutions to have an onsite official authorized to apply the reasonable and prudent parent standard who has the same training in applying the standard as is required of foster parents
- Have policies in place to ensure appropriate caregiver liability when approving an activity for a youth in foster care

## Facilitating the Normalcy Conversation

Implementation of the new law's provisions is only one step toward a larger goal of creating a child welfare system that provides a more normal experience for youth in foster care. Well-being can be achieved when such a system is trauma informed and responsive to the needs and voices of youth and emerging adults. Bringing together key stakeholders to have a normalcy conversation can further inform the effective implementation of normalcy policies and protocols that promote age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate activities.

On May 29, 2015, the White House—supported by the Children's Bureau, Annie E. Casey Foundation, and Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative—hosted a national summit to address normalcy, reasonable and prudent parent standard provisions, and developmentally appropriate services for youth and young adults in foster care. The summit assembled young people who have been in foster care, foster parents, child welfare directors and commissioners from across the country, and leading researchers in adolescent development. Meeting participants were encouraged to identify priority areas for change, establish agreement about normalcy across multidisciplinary groups, listen to the voices of youth and emerging adults in foster care, and work toward a foster care system that is responsive to their needs. Breakout sessions explored best practices for promoting normalcy through cross-system collaboration, and discussions generated ideas for subsequent action steps. (For more information on the White House Convening on Developmentally Appropriate Services for Youth and Young Adults in Foster Care, see the resources section at the end of this guide.)

Mirroring the White House Convening, child welfare agencies are encouraged to organize normalcy conversations among a broad array of State stakeholders (see below). These stakeholders should understand how the shift to normalcy will affect their work and how it can better support positive outcomes for children and youth.

## Normalcy Conversation Topics

Implementation of the reasonable and prudent parent standard requires a vision of normalcy that extends beyond granting permission for youth to participate in age-appropriate activities. This vision must reflect the complexities involved in providing a nurturing environment that supports the healthy social and emotional development of each young person, valued as an individual. For example, reconciling competing values among caregivers, the young person, and his or her birth family may touch on personal preferences for expression of individual style, cultural values, spiritual beliefs and rituals, language, gender identity, and political expression. Accepting that these complexities exist and often do not have easy solutions is critical to engaging in a productive conversation that leads to positive solutions.

To build a better understanding of normalcy and a reasonable and prudent parent standard, State normalcy conversations should address the following topics.

**Child and adolescent development.** Normal child and adolescent development can be thought of as following an accepted pattern or process. While the timing of progress among individual children and youth will vary, there is a range that is considered normal. For instance, if a child's height and weight fall into a certain range, they are considered to be developing normally. Likewise, a range of normal development exists for the social, emotional, cognitive, sexual, moral, and spiritual domains. While ages may be specified for developmental milestones and used for reference purposes, it is typically more useful to focus on the process or pattern of development.

**Brain development.** In the early years of a child's development, the brain relies heavily on the limbic system and emotional responses. The frontal lobe is the last part of the brain to fully develop (typically in the mid to late 20s) and is responsible for problem solving, judgment, and impulse control. In developing policy and practices related to normal activities, it is important to understand this transition from a brain focused primarily on emotion and the brain that is still developing complex thought. Adolescent risk-taking can actually be considered normal in light of changes in the brain and the fact that adolescent brains may not have the capacity to consider the long-term outcomes of their decisions. (For more information, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h68KndmmF0c.)

**Trauma.** Children and youth in child welfare often have experienced trauma as a result of having been abused or neglected, removed from their homes, moved between foster care placements, and/or placed in residential settings. These experiences can affect brain development, which in turn, can have negative effects on behavior and how youth cope with their environments.[4] However, the brain's reaction to negative stimuli can change over time with an increase of positive stimuli that comes from positive and engaging relationships and experiences with peers and adults. It is important to promote positive permanent relationships for youth, offer varied social and cultural supports, provide stable living arrangements, and ensure multiple opportunities that foster their sense of accomplishment and self-worth. These experiences and activities can have a significant impact on reducing the effects of trauma.

**Culturally and developmentally appropriate activities.** Foster parents and caregivers are encouraged to support and provide permission for activities that are appropriate to each child's or youth's age, development, maturity level, and interests. This may relate to a wide range of activities such as use of social media, driving, outings, and dating. Permission is not absolute, but rather requires discussions between foster parents (or other caregivers) and youth about rules, expectations, and building trust over time. Interest in activities may vary for different youth to reflect their cultural and religious backgrounds and preferences—for example attending a church service or a pow wow—and may differ from the activities the foster family typically participates in.

> *"A foster parent's ability to understand the importance of helping the youth in their care engage in the same activities that youth [not in foster care] engage in is absolutely critical to ensuring youth [in foster care] are fully prepared to lead a successful adult life."*
>
> — Center for States Young Adult Consultant

**Identify formation.** Exploring self-expression through unfamiliar, unusual, and seemingly extreme choices in clothing, hair styles, music, slang, and activities is normal behavior for emerging adults. Parents and children differ about what is "appropriate" and where lines are drawn as to what is "acceptable." Teen fashion trends are commonly at the center of differences between caregivers and youth across cultures and ethnicities. Nurturing a young person's need to explore who they are means providing them with some space to explore different interests and realize their personal values. Adolescents may move in and out of social groups to develop their identity among their peers in the context of the current social norms. During this time, caregivers and child welfare staff need to consider the following:

- How can caregivers be true to their own cultural history and family values while also nurturing the young person's identity or exploration?

4 Child Welfare Information Gateway (2015). Understanding the effects of maltreatment on brain development. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.

- How can caregivers be supported to consider the values of the youth and his or her birth family if they are in conflict with the home setting?

**Liability.** Liability of caregivers can be an area of great concern for current and prospective foster parents and service providers. To ease these concerns, States should discuss how liability is addressed in legislation or policy. The potential liability that may arise from allowing a child or youth to engage in normal activities—such as sports, camping, and other physical activities—should not be different than it is for non-foster parents and their children. All parents must take into account the reasonably foreseeable risks of an activity and implement appropriate safeguards and supervision. It is the responsibility of the State to decide how liability issues are reflected in policy and communicated to caregivers and community service providers.

**Training.** As new policies and practices are created to address new parenting standards, child welfare staff, foster parents, contractors, youth, and others involved with the child welfare system will need training. States need to plan for training early in the process so that as implementation occurs, stakeholders are informed and prepared.

**Cross-system supports.** Cross-system collaboration is essential to enhance developmentally appropriate services for children, youth, and young adults. States can bring stakeholders together to build relationships and identify opportunities that contribute to a collective strategy for promoting normalcy. This is also an opportunity to build the knowledge and skills needed to successfully implement a culture change process.

## Stakeholders to Include in Normalcy Conversations

Facilitating normalcy conversations among multiple stakeholders at the State and local level can promote collective action and consistent implementation of normalcy and reasonable and prudent parent standards. Key stakeholders, and their roles in promoting normalcy, include:

- **State and County Child Welfare Agency Directors and Other Key Leaders.** Agency Directors are critical to setting the tone of normalcy efforts within their agency and ensuring that staff and service providers understand the link between supporting normalcy and long-term outcomes for youth in care. In addition, Directors can communicate with governors, legislators, and other political leaders who can ensure that barriers in State laws are addressed. State Directors also can address liability policies before they become a significant barrier.

- **Youth.** Youth are the experts on what is best for them when it comes to normalcy, and they should be aware of their rights to advocate for it. Youth need to be brought into the normalcy conversation so that they can provide their perspectives on their needs and help professionals understand important aspects of implementing normalcy. While youth may not always be allowed to participate in all the activities that they wish, the ability for youth to express their opinions and to be heard is critical to their development. Listening to youth and having discussions with them is an essential empowerment strategy that has long-term impact on development.

> *"At the end of the day, if [a] youth's life is anything but normal, the youth needs to know that they can advocate for themselves in a way that prompts change to reinstate some kind of normalcy."*
>
> — Center for States Young Adult Consultant

- **Foster Parents.** Foster parents should be involved in the normalcy conversation so that they can provide the best possible environment for youth in their care. As the primary implementers of normalcy, foster parents must have training to ensure safe and effective application. Training should build an understanding that normalcy does not mean that youth can do whatever they want, but rather that the foster parent can be prudent and use their parenting skills to allow youth to participate in appropriate activities.

- **Congregate Care Providers.** Congregate care is typically the most restrictive placement and the least normal experience for youth in care. Child welfare agencies should carefully consider the youth who are placed in

congregate care and if those placements are appropriate to the needs of the youth. Congregate care providers need to be involved in the normalcy conversation, so that they can start adjusting limitations that affect youth's lives. Each congregate care setting is different, and it is important to discuss what normalcy looks like in the context of the youth's current level of care and who will make the decision to increase normalcy. In addition to the youth workers in these organizations, others in the provider agency—from the top administrators to the support staff—need to fully embrace normalcy principles. Helping youth in care engage in activities that their peers engage in means thinking differently about program and work schedules, visits, therapy, transportation, and other program activities. It means shifting from the traditional, control-based environment of residential programs to a more family-like environment. Of critical importance is developing the family-based resources to support the transition of the youth to a less restrictive environment.

- **Foster Care Managers and Supervisors.** Foster Care Managers help recruit, train, and guide foster parents in their efforts to support youth and can help ensure that prospective and current foster parents understand the expectations around normalcy. In addition, Foster Care Managers may be point persons for the creation of State policy and practice guidelines for the reasonable and prudent parent standard. Managers and supervisors also provide guidance in implementation; for example, they may help foster parents decide if an activity aligns with the State's reasonable and prudent parent standard.

- **Independent Living (IL) Coordinators.** IL Coordinators should assist in coordinating the implementation of new normalcy policies. They work with youth directly on their IL needs and transition planning, and will integrate normalcy provisions into such work. IL Coordinators also play an important role in helping agency staff, service providers, and others understand the needs of older youth in foster care and ensuring that youth are given the opportunities they need to grow and succeed. They can help support alternative approaches to care that promote self-regulation skills and reflect positive developmental experiences that are trauma informed.

- **Foster Care Workers/Caseworkers.** Foster Care Workers play a direct role with youth in care and their caregivers. An understanding of the complex and daily expectations of normalcy is needed for these workers to provide the best oversight. Given their direct work with foster parents and other caregivers, it is important to include them in the normalcy discussion so they can communicate concerns and perspectives.

- **Youth Workers.** Youth Workers are agency staff who work primarily with older youth on a regular basis and are typically familiar with youth's interests, strengths, and challenges. These workers are highly engaged with those with whom they work and often advocate with young people regarding their individual needs. Youth Workers need to be aware of conditions that help youth thrive in order to provide opportunities for youth to experience nurturing environments and ensure that all young people have experiences that contribute to normal and healthy development.

- **Adoption Workers.** Children and youth who have participated in normal activities in foster care may be able to adjust more easily to daily life in an adoptive home. Adoption workers' understanding of normalcy can assist in preparing the youth, their current home, and their prospective adoptive home and parents for the youth's current level of normal activity.

- **Licensing and Oversight Staff.** Licensing and oversight staff can have extensive contact with foster homes and congregate care providers and, as such, need to understand normalcy laws. They should be brought into the normalcy conversation to promote better training and oversight of the homes available to youth and to monitor liability.

- **Community-Based Agencies.** Community-based agencies provide a range of services for the foster care system. State agencies should collaborate with community-based agencies to train and educate caregivers and service providers to promote normalcy. Working alongside State agencies, community-based agencies need to be included in normalcy efforts and collaborate in support of developmentally appropriate services for youth and young adults.

- **Courts.** The family court's role is to ensure that the best interests of children and youth are at the forefront of every decision. Courts are critical partners in efforts to ensure youth in foster care engage in the same activities as their peers while also recognizing the resource constraints of child welfare agencies. Judges and other court personnel can help find creative solutions to barriers youth face when trying to engage in school and community activities. Courts should not be the barrier to participation in activities. For example, in most cases it is unlikely that a court order should be obtained to participate in normal and routine activities (such as a school field trip).

- **Legislators.** It is critical to have legislative "normalcy champions" who can help their colleagues understand the importance of having youth in foster care lead as normal a life as possible. These champions can help overcome legal barriers through legislation that addresses normalcy and related issues (e.g., insurance and liability issues to allow youth in foster care to learn how to drive) and can advocate for fiscal and non-fiscal resources needed to ensure success.

- **Educators/Schools.** Schools want to help youth in foster care succeed. Some have found ways to engage with foster parents and congregate care providers to ensure that youth in foster care have the same opportunities as other youth. Having the voice of educators at the table—including those who are coaches or club advisors—will help identify ways to address and find solutions to intentional and unintentional barriers.

## Tips for the Normalcy Conversation

Normalcy is essential to achieving successful outcomes for children and youth in foster care and requires collaboration among a broad base of stakeholders. It is important to recognize that normalcy conversations create a vision. In these conversations, there is a tendency to highlight specific situations or examples of activities that will continue to remain controversial (e.g., tattoos, learning to use a gun, or riding an all-terrain vehicle). Often there are State laws or requirements around these activities that must be followed. Try to focus instead on typical activities for youth to help frame the normalcy conversation. The following guidelines can help promote productive normalcy conversations:

- Make sure youth and young adults are at the table and are prepared and supported to engage in the conversation
- Devote considerable time in stakeholder meetings to developing a shared vision of normalcy
- Create an environment where participants feel they can provide feedback, share their perspectives and experiences, and challenge assumptions
- Set ground rules to guide discussions
- Plan time for participants to build relationships
- Provide opportunities for stakeholders to learn about each other's areas of expertise and to understand potential areas of conflict or misunderstanding
- Ensure that all stakeholders have a voice and feel that their role is important so they can become more connected to the common goals
- Engage stakeholders in identifying obstacles to normalcy, recognizing actual versus perceived barriers, and brainstorming strategies for overcoming them
- Develop a strategic action plan for implementing the stakeholders' vision of normalcy

**Consider posing questions like these to help focus goals, objectives, and strategies for moving forward:**

- *How do we create a comprehensive approach to the reasonable and prudent parent standard to best serve children, youth, and young adults in the foster care system?*

- *What training and support systems are needed for the workforce and caregivers to support youth in care and to continue to support those over age 18?*

- *How do we inspire a culture of cross-system collaboration in support of enhancing developmentally appropriate services for youth and young adults, including collaboration with community organizations (e.g., employers, academic institutions, housing agencies), cross-discipline supports, and the use of the youth-adult partnerships?*

## Moving Forward

Promoting a cultural shift to normalcy within the child welfare system will take concerted effort and engagement of a broad array of stakeholders. This guide can help child welfare professionals understand why normalcy for children and youth in foster care is essential, who needs to be involved in conversations about normalcy, and what they need to discuss. Facilitating normalcy conversations represents a critical step in developing and implementing related laws, policies, and practices that will set the stage for improved outcomes for youth and young adults leaving foster care. Recognize, however, that normalcy conversations are not a "one and done" effort. Promoting normalcy is an ongoing and evolving process that must be integrated into routine practice, adapt as youth needs evolve, and continuously improve.

## Acknowledgments

The Capacity Building Center for States would like to acknowledge the many contributions to this product from the Center's Young Adult Consultants and Family Consultants, and from State Independent Living Coordinators.

## Resources

- **Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (P.L. 113–183)**
  https://www.congress.gov/113/plaws/publ183/PLAW-113publ183.pdf

- **White House Convening on Developmentally Appropriate Services for Children, Youth, and Young Adults in Foster Care**

  - **Summary Report**
    https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/preventing-sex-trafficking/

  - **Videos:**
    White House Summit Opening Remarks: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bnD8UmhXfxI

    White House Summit Discussion on Normalcy: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9A1BWrLJNPw

    White House Summit Discussion on Neuroscience: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h68KndmmF0c

This product was created by the Capacity Building Center for States under Contract No. HHSP233201400033C, funded by the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.