

# Tip Sheet on Responding to Youth and Young Adult Mental Health Needs



## Purpose

This tip sheet is designed to support state, tribal, county, and private child welfare programs in reaching out to and addressing the wellness and mental health needs of youth and young adults. It includes tips to help promote mental health and wellness services, jurisdictional highlights, and links to relevant resources and tools.

## Importance

The *2021 U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Protecting Youth Mental Health* highlights the urgent need to address the mental health crisis affecting many youth—an issue many child welfare professionals are witnessing firsthand.<sup>1</sup> The report identifies risk factors contributing to youth mental health symptoms, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which also reflect common experiences for youth and young adults in and/or formerly in foster care:<sup>2</sup>

- More adverse childhood experiences
- Mental health challenges before the pandemic
- Disruptions in routine
- Financial instability, food shortages, or housing instability
- Trauma

*"In fall 2021, a coalition of leading experts in pediatric health declared a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health."*

Source: Office of the Surgeon General. (2021). *Protecting youth mental health: U.S. Surgeon General's advisory*.

<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>

## Opportunities

Below are tips to consider when responding to the mental health and wellness needs of youth and young adults.

### Tip #1: Reach Out to Youth and Young Adults to Promote Wellness and Address Mental Health Needs

Effective outreach on issues of mental health requires sensitivity and an understanding of trauma-informed approaches<sup>3</sup> and of the systemic and cultural barriers young people may face in seeking mental health supports.

#### Use a Trauma-Informed Approach

Youth and young adults may be hesitant or unwilling to seek out mental health or wellness

### Addressing Staff Mental Health Needs, Too

While this tip sheet focuses on the mental health needs of youth and young adults, it is critical to acknowledge that those who serve young people in the child welfare system may also be at risk for secondary traumatic stress or burnout. Child welfare organizations that experience this level of fatigue among staff may face high absenteeism and worker turnover and a lack of collaboration among staff and with leadership. Research suggests that supervisory, peer, and organizational supports, as well as trauma-informed caregiving development, can impact whether staff experience secondary traumatic stress or burnout.

To learn more, see "Secondary Traumatic Stress" (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.).

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/workforce/workforcewellbeing/burnout/secondary/>

supports. This may be a result of a confluence of circumstances that stem from cultural and community norms, family expectations, or fear or mistrust of service providers. Applying a trauma-informed approach when reaching out is critical to support authentic engagement and mitigate unintended harm. Consider:<sup>4</sup>

- Prioritizing training for program staff to build capacity to apply trauma-informed approaches to mental health service outreach efforts; this may include training on recognizing personal biases and systemic challenges young people may face to engage in mental health and wellness services.
- Identifying and creating processes and structures that afford staff opportunities to focus on authentic engagement, rapport, and relationship building. Research shows that young people reported more positive interactions with their caseworkers when caseworkers honestly communicated, frequently visited, and connected in an authentic manner. The same research shows that the most important factor in determining whether youth had a positive experience with mental health professionals was whether youth felt they were being treated “like a person” and not “like a file.”<sup>5</sup>
- Developing and disseminating protocols that clearly articulate young people’s rights when engaging in mental health or wellness services; these protocols may include information about confidentiality, young people’s rights to refuse services or medication, and help around making decisions regarding mental health treatment.<sup>6</sup>

### Understand and Address Cultural and Systemic Barriers

It is also important to be cognizant of the different cultural experiences that may shape young people’s views about mental health supports. Programs must also address potential language barriers or limited access to providers who have similar cultural backgrounds as the young people they serve. To increase understanding and address cultural and systemic barriers, consider:<sup>7</sup>

- Developing culturally specific<sup>8</sup> messaging that normalizes engagement in mental health and wellness services and addresses potential stigma, mistrust, or fear born from cultural or systemic barriers
- Offering training for program staff that increases understanding of cultural differences in engaging in mental health services and systemic barriers that prevent some populations from accessing mental health services

#### Native Communities’ Whole-Self Approach to Wellness

In some tribal communities, mental health is considered through the lens of a whole-self model where wellness includes mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects. This model is grounded in emphasizing the importance of nurturing family and community relationships. Understanding and having a connection to this model are important when reaching out to or engaging youth from these communities in mental health supports.

Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2018, May). *Mental health essentials in Native communities: A guide for grantees*.

<https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/tttac-cy4-mental-health-fact-sheet-508-compliant.pdf?msckid=1494fed2b5c211ec82c26292b35e301f>

- Establishing and sharing the availability of culturally specific mental health and wellness services offered by providers with experience and expertise working with diverse populations that match the demographics of the young people served by the child welfare program

### **Target Outreach to the Unique Needs of Specific Populations of Youth and Young Adults**

Outreach on mental health or wellness services must also be tailored to young people’s identities, strengths, and experiences to increase the likelihood of meaningful engagement. Consider:

- Building staff’s capacity to understand and support the unique mental health needs of various populations of youth and young adults, including but not limited to racial and ethnic minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, two-spirited, and other non-heterosexual orientations and gender identities (LGBTQIA2S+) youth; pregnant and parenting youth; and youth with disabilities (see also appendix A)
- Creating tools or resources to help program staff identify, recruit, and engage populations of youth and young adults who experience significant barriers to mental health and wellness services
- Developing population-specific messaging to promote mental health and wellness services that are easy to understand and appropriate for youth and young adults at varying developmental stages

### **Tip #2: Promote Wellness and Address the Mental Health Needs of Youth and Young Adults**

To meaningfully address youths’ and young adults’ mental health needs means more than just providing counseling services. It also requires a holistic approach that focuses broadly on young people’s well-being within the contexts of home, family, work, school, and community.

While evidence-based programs and services are important, for youth and young adults, connections to their schools, communities, and friends are very important. Exploring interests, having opportunities to try new things, and engaging in activities are important to the wellness of young people.

#### **Colorado’s Efforts to Address the Mental Health Needs of Youth and Young Adults**

In July 2021, Colorado established “I Matter,” a program that provides free mental health and substance use disorder services for any youth. The effort was designed to address mental health stressors adolescents experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The I Matter program:

- Provides young people at least three (and up to six) free behavioral health sessions
- Reimburses participating providers
- Offers virtual sessions, which has helped youth in rural areas or those who do not have transportation
- Seeks to connect youth to providers for ongoing care after they have completed the free sessions

Source: Colorado Department of Human Services. (2022, January). *I Matter program gains momentum, addresses growing stress and anxiety facing youth*. <https://cdhs.colorado.gov/press-release/imatter-program-gains-momentum-addresses-growing-stress-andanxiety-facing-youth>

## Identify and Engage Promising and Evidence-Based Programs and Services

Implementing programs supported by research helps promote healthy development, supports youth, and increases their resilience.<sup>9</sup> To identify and engage appropriate, promising, and evidence-based mental health and wellness programs, consider:

- Connecting directly with a diverse array of young people to identify the types of programs that may be helpful to them and gathering and assessing information about relevant locally and virtually available services<sup>10</sup>
- In collaboration with youth and young adults, identifying ways to compile and disseminate these resources so they are easily accessible to young people
- Exploring and engaging locally available holistic approaches to wellness and mental health services; examples may include youth enrichment programs (e.g., mentoring, after-school programs), skill-based parenting and family relationship approaches, and other efforts that address social determinants of youth health such as poverty, exposure to trauma, and lack of access to education and health care<sup>11</sup>
- Exploring flexible funding to support mental health and holistic wellness supports, including ways to use Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee program) funds<sup>12</sup>

## Empower Youth and Young Adults in Mental Health Decision-Making Processes

In age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate ways, youth and young adults should be able to make informed decisions about the treatment and services they receive, who they receive them from, and when. Consider:<sup>13</sup>

- Empowering young people to gain awareness and insight into their potential mental health struggles by sharing innovative tools and resources that are self-guided and confidential so young people have discreet and private opportunities to explore their needs and what services may be available to help them
- Developing resources, toolkits, or checklists for young people to meaningfully engage in decision-making processes about their mental health, including treatment options and the use of medications
- Creating resources for young people to help assess who to share mental health services information with and how to gather information from or ask questions about mental health services to mental health providers, caseworkers, physicians, attorneys, and judges

### States Offer Opportunities to Connect, Focus on Wellness, and Build Community

Kansas is one of several states that hosts “Wellness Wednesdays,” which offer young people in foster care an informal and safe space to connect and discuss how they are faring—particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Kansas also offers “Life Skills Saturdays,” which focus on a range of self-sufficiency topics. Both opportunities are offered virtually and include mindfulness exercises, vision board activities, and more.

## Appendix A: Additional Resources

Below are additional tools, literature, and resources on youth and young adult mental health needs in child welfare systems.

### General Literature

- [Mental Health and Foster Care](#): This webpage from the National Conference of State Legislatures tracks state legislation related to mental health and foster youth.
- [Mental and Behavioral Health Needs of Children in Foster Care](#): This article from the American Academy of Pediatrics shares information about experiences that impact the mental health needs of foster youth and addresses issues relating to accessing mental health services.
- [The Cumulative Impact of the Pandemic on Youth Who Have Been in Foster Care or Homeless](#): This analysis surveyed youth to assess the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, finding significant mental health impacts on youth who have been in foster care or homeless.
- [Mental Health](#): This topic page on the website [Youth.gov](#) includes federal publications, data, programs, and literature that generally address youth mental health issues.

### Practical Tools and Resources

- [Resources for Professionals and Others Supporting Young People During Times of Uncertainty](#): This resource page from Child Welfare Information Gateway compiles tools and guides for professionals, parents, and caregivers to support young people in times of uncertainty.
- [Supporting Youth in Foster Care in Making Healthy Choices: A Guide for Caregivers and Caseworkers on Trauma, Treatment, and Psychotropic Medications](#): This guide aims to educate caseworkers and foster parents about trauma experienced by youth in foster care and shares treatment options, including approaches other than psychotropic medication. There is also a [companion guide](#) for youth in foster care.
- [Screening, Assessing, Monitoring Outcomes, and Using Evidence-Based Interventions to Improve the Well-Being of Children in Child Welfare](#): This paper describes a process for delivering trauma screening, functional and clinical assessment, evidence-based interventions, and the use of progress monitoring to better achieve well-being outcomes for youth in foster care.
- [Trauma-Informed Guiding Principles for Working With Transition Age Youth: Provider Fact Sheet](#): This fact sheet describes transition-age youth and their unique experiences and offers trauma-informed tips to support youth in their journey and recovery.
- [Meeting the moment: How child welfare and substance use disorder treatment professionals can address the needs of adolescents and young adults at risk of suicide](#): This webinar provides tips to child welfare and substance abuse treatment professionals on how to identify adolescents at risk for suicide and mental health concerns. It also offers prevention, resiliency, and recovery strategies.
- [Youth Mental Health First Aid](#): This course from the National Council for Mental Wellbeing is designed to teach parents, family members, caregivers, teachers, school staff, and human services workers how to help adolescents experiencing mental health or addiction challenges.
- [Hope Givers](#): This PBS-produced free video series for youth, parents, and teachers includes lessons plans, handouts for developing coping skills, and mental health resources for youth. The

videos address issues of resilience, mentorship, and goal setting and also include real stories, animation, and art created by youth.

## Population-Specific Literature or Tools

### Black, Indigenous, and People of Color

- [Mental health care among blacks in America: Confronting racism and constructing solutions](#): This article describes reasons why people of color in need of mental health care do not often receive treatment, as well as explores issues of racial discrimination.
- [Mental Health Essentials in Native Communities: A Guide for Grantees](#): This guide provides an overview of mental health myths and facts in Native communities while also sharing information about historical trauma experienced within Indian country.

### Cross-System Youth

- [Multisystem-Involved Youth: A Developmental Framework and Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice](#): This article summarizes literature on multisystem-involved youth and discusses efforts to assess exposure to complex trauma and provide clinical and family-related evidence-based services.

### LGBTQIA2S+ Youth

- [Breaking Barriers to Quality Mental Health Care for LGBTQ Youth](#): This paper from the Trevor Project highlights disparities in receipt of desired mental health care as well as LGBTQ youth perceptions of barriers to receiving mental health care. Drawing from data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, the paper also offers recommendations for ways to address barriers to quality mental health care for LGBTQ youth.

### Pregnant and Parenting Youth

- [Addressing the Mental Health Needs of Pregnant and Parenting Adolescents](#): This paper provides an overview of the mental health challenges associated with teen parenthood, barriers that often prevent teen mothers from seeking mental health services, and interventions for this population.

### Youth Experiencing Grief and Loss

- [The Wounded Spirit: Grief and Loss in Foster Care](#): This course helps participants gain knowledge and tools to help cope with feelings of grief and ambiguous loss and the unique challenges foster youth face through the grieving process.
- [Best Practices for Grief: Foster Care Placement](#): This video provides professionals with techniques for helping children and youth cope with grief.

### Youth With Substance Use Disorders (SUD)

- [Understanding Substance Use Disorders – What Child Welfare Staff Need to Know](#): This fact sheet from the National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare addresses common myths and misconceptions about SUDs and provides links to additional resources for child welfare professionals.

## Acknowledgement

This publication was made possible through support from Contract No. 75ACF121F80017 through funds from the Division X Targeted TA contract with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau. Special acknowledgement to Children’s Bureau staff Catherine Heath, Beth Claxon, and Kimberly Huhn Murphy who guided and informed the development of this tip sheet. Thank you also to ICF staff and consultants (in alphabetical order) who wrote and contributed to this tip sheet: Elliott Hinkle, Kristine Gunningham, Jessica R. Kendall, Shailiegh Piepmeier, Madison Sandoval-Lunn, Francesca Stern, Cat Teague, and Eric Warner.

---

1 Office of the Surgeon General. (2021). *Protecting youth mental health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s advisory*.

<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>

2 The report further noted that the COVID-19 pandemic most heavily affected those who were vulnerable to begin with, such as youth with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ youth, low-income youth, youth in rural areas, youth in immigrant households, youth involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems, and homeless youth.

3 See SAMHSA’s Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, which conceptualizes a trauma-informed approach as when “a program, organization, or system that is trauma-informed realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; and responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and seeks to actively resist retraumatization.”

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative. (2014). *SAMHSA’s concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach*. [https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA\\_Trauma.pdf](https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf)

4 For more general training on trauma-informed approaches, see the Child Welfare Trauma Training Toolkit. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (n.d.). *Child welfare trauma training toolkit*. <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/child-welfare-trauma-training-toolkit>

5 Faulkner, M., Belseth, T., Adkins, T., & Perez, A. (2018). *Authentic relationships matter most: A new model for permanency*. The University of Texas at Austin. [https://utyps.socialwork.utexas.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/TYPS-Pilot-Study-Report\\_3.6.18-2.pdf](https://utyps.socialwork.utexas.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/TYPS-Pilot-Study-Report_3.6.18-2.pdf)

6 Ibid.

7 See, e.g., National Alliance on Mental Illness. (n.d.). *Identity and cultural dimensions*. <https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Identity-and-Cultural-Dimensions>;

Office of the Surgeon General, Center for Mental Health Services, National Institute of Mental Health & Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2001). *Mental health: Culture, race, and ethnicity: A supplement to mental health: A report of the surgeon general*. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK44249/>; Alang, S. M. (2019).

Mental health care among blacks in America: Confronting racism and constructing solutions. *Health Services*

*Research*, 54(2), 346–355. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1475-6773.13115>

8 Culturally specific supports are those that include culturally relevant and linguistically specific services and resources to culturally specific communities. See, e.g., 34 U.S. Code § 12291. Examples may include developing outreach materials in the primary languages young people speak, connecting young people to providers and community supports who share their identities (race, gender, faith, culture, disability, etc.), offering peer-to-peer support opportunities for LGBTQIA2S+ youth and young adults, and including faith-based provider options for young people from communities with a strong faith-based focus.

9 Office of the Surgeon General. (2021). *Protecting youth mental health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s advisory*.

<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>

10 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2019). *Finding evidence-based programs and practices*.

[https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/20190719-samhsa-finding\\_evidence-based-programs-practices.pdf](https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/20190719-samhsa-finding_evidence-based-programs-practices.pdf)

11 See, e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). *Preventing adverse childhood experiences: Leveraging the best available evidence*. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/preventingACES.pdf>

12 Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau. (2021, March). Program instruction ACYF-CB-PI-21-04.

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/pi2104.pdf>

13 See, e.g., Children’s Bureau. (2012). *Making healthy choices: A guide on psychotropic medications for youth in foster care*.

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/makinghealthychoices/>; and California Department of Social

Services. (n.d.). *Foster youth mental health bill of rights*.

<https://www.cdss.ca.gov/cdssweb/entres/forms/English/PUB488.pdf>

