

## Challenges of Youth in the Child Protection System

According to Casey Family Programs, about 25,000 young people between the ages of 18 and 21 must leave foster care each year. These young people have experienced maltreatment and lived with instability. So it will probably come as no surprise that they are often ill prepared to suddenly live independently and figure out on their own how to do what the foster care system was set up to do for them—feed, clothe and house them. Aging out of foster care without a permanent home is the highest-risk outcome for a foster youth. Recall some of these statistics about older and aging-out youth from the e-learning:

- Approximately 25% of former foster youth nationwide reported that they had been homeless within 2–4 years of exiting foster care. (National Alliance to End Homelessness).
- Foster youth approach the transition to adulthood with significant educational deficits—
  - o They are 14 times more likely *not* to complete college than the general population (Chapin Hall Midwest Study).
  - o They are more than twice as likely *not* to have a high school diploma or GED as their peers (Chapin Hall Midwest Study).
- About 25% of foster care alumni experience post-traumatic stress (vs. 4% of the general population) (Northwest Foster Care Alumni Survey).
- The unemployment rate among foster care alumni was 47% (Chapin Hall Midwest Study).
- Youth in the system receive healthcare through Medicaid and are at risk of losing this coverage once they age out of care; only half of young adults leaving care have medical insurance (Chapin Hall Midwest Study).
- Thirty percent of youth participating in the Midwest Study reported being arrested; 15% reported being convicted of a crime; and 29% reported being incarcerated (Chapin Hall Midwest Study at Age 21).

Based on CASA volunteers' more than 30 years of experience working with the highest-risk cases of maltreatment—and applying recent research findings on the concept of possible selves—we believe we have the opportunity to effect positive outcomes through the *Fostering Futures* volunteer training program.

## Youth Development

In the e-learning, you learned about the many developmental changes that happen during adolescence. Adolescent development represents the period that bridges childhood to adulthood.

<u><b>Children</b></u>	<u><b>Adolescents</b></u>	<u><b>Healthy Adults</b></u>
Selfish, self-centered Dependent on adults	Transition and Change	Unselfish, thoughtful Able to care for self and others
Irresponsible Immature Identify with family		Dependable, responsible Mature Identify independent of family
Oblivious of world problems Not expected to make important decisions Playful (child's job is to learn) Supported by others		Can cope with world problems Must be able to make important decisions Work (job is serious business) Self-supporting, support others
Non-sexual in relationships Values dictated by family		Sexually competent Have own value system to guide life

<b>Many Adolescents...</b>	<b>But...</b>
Want to be grown up Don't want anyone to treat them like a child Want to make their own decisions Know they need help Are confident they are right Are full of bravado	Are afraid to grow up Often respond with immature reactions Don't trust their own decisions Are too proud to ask for/accept help Are scared of being discovered a fraud Are full of fear

Behaviorally, adolescents are trying out new skills, behaviors and habits. They are in an extended period of trial and error, determining what will work best for them. Many times, these determinations are made based on what feels most gratifying at the time. Therefore, adolescents experiment with beliefs, religions, sex, drugs and alcohol, education and employment.

Adolescents' decisions are often puzzling and illogical to the adult mind. Decisions can be impulsive, with poor judgment exercised on a regular basis. Many of their decisions are based on emotional reactions.

As older youth journey out of childhood, your work with them will begin to include elements that will help them navigate this transition into adulthood and independent living.

In "Brain Changes, Not Hormones, Explain Many Adolescent Behaviors" (December 31, 2000), Associated Press writer Matt Crenson provides this analysis:

*Parents and experts have always blamed the same hormones that catapult young bodies into adulthood for the sleeping until noon, the reckless driving, the drug use and the other woes of adolescence. But recent research shows that what's going on above teen-agers' necks, not raging hormones, explains the changes.*

*Beginning around age 11, the brain undergoes major reorganization in an area associated with things like social behavior and impulse control. Neuroscientists figured this out only in the last few years, and the discovery has led them to see adolescence as a period when the developing brain is vulnerable to traumatic experiences, drug abuse and unhealthy influences.*

*"Adolescence is a time of risk-taking," says Lynn Ponton, a psychiatrist at the University of California-San Francisco and author of The Romance of Risk: Why Teen-Agers Do the Things They Do. "A big part of adolescence is learning how to assess the risk in an activity," Ponton says. "Part of the reason teen-agers aren't good at risk-taking is that the brain isn't fully developed."*

*Looked at that way, it is no big surprise that accidents are the leading cause of death among adolescents or that teens are more likely to become crime victims than any other age group. It's no wonder that the vast majority of alcoholics and smokers get started during their teen years or that a quarter of all people with HIV contract it before age 21.*

## Engaging Youth

### *Principles of Engagement for Adolescents*

<b>Principle</b>	<b>Ideas to Keep in Mind</b>
<i>Meeting the youth where the youth is</i>	Be aware of the world in which the adolescent lives: what are the pressures, expectations, supports? Visit them in their own space when appropriate.
<i>Building on strengths</i>	First and foremost, identify a list of strengths with the youth. This is critical with adolescents who lack confidence and expect you to think of them as “less than” and incompetent.
<i>Empowering youth</i>	Be forthright with your recognition of them as operating in the adult world with the power to make decisions and to act for themselves. Be direct in placing responsibility on them as their own agent of change. Adolescents expect you to tell them what to do and how to do it. You will have to work hard to get them to make their own decisions and self-advocate based on the information you provide. Involvement in court hearings is an excellent way for youth to feel empowered and to learn self-advocacy skills.
<i>Involving youth in assessment, planning and decision making</i>	Ask them what would feel helpful. Because this is a transitional and confusing time in development, they may need different things from you at different times. Check in frequently because what they need can change from visit to visit. Make sure the adolescent is choosing and developing goals in order to hold him or her accountable to outcomes and progress. If the adolescent doesn’t develop the goals, it is easier for them to say this was never their plan. Make sure adolescents participate in all planning meetings and court hearings that discuss their future.
<i>Recognizing steps to success</i>	Recognize progress and movement toward improved decision making. Immature brain development in adolescents contributes to the tendency to over-generalize and over-dramatize. Help them keep perspective by recognizing small steps and change. Inform decision-makers, including judges, of positive change and successes the youth achieves. Keep the historical perspective for youth in order to help them recognize where they started and where they are now.
<i>Building hope, expectancy</i>	Convey your hope and belief that they will be successful and can accomplish their goals. Adolescents regularly fluctuate between grand ideas that can be unrealistic and despairing perspectives, which can also be unrealistic. You may have to act as the constant to their changing

	<p>perspectives. Maintain realistic hope and expectancy. Involving youth in planning their future helps maintain realistic goals.</p>
<p><i>Honoring and connecting with cultural resources</i></p>	<p>Many times, an adolescent may have rejected a supportive cultural resource in their own attempts to separate and individuate. It may be critical to help them recognize support and how to tap into available resources as an adult versus the old relationship they may have had with the resource as a dependent child. Conversely, it may be necessary to help an adolescent recognize a culture which is detrimental to progress and the need to separate from this identity while forging a new identity. For instance, the culture of drug abuse.</p>
<p><i>Linking to concrete services</i></p>	<p>There is a fine balance between telling adolescents what to do and providing the concrete services they need when they feel overwhelmed. Adolescents may not admit that they need a particular service because they are not sure what will be required of them. It is important to find out what concrete services they need, what they don't know they need and what they absolutely do not want. These may change frequently, so it is important to stay in frequent contact. Assist the adolescent in advocating to obtain these services either from the social worker or directly from the service provider.</p>
<p><i>Facilitating skill-based practice</i></p>	<p>Adolescents require more skills practice than adults. A positive aspect of this state is that you may not be trying to undo entrenched patterns but simply shaping positive patterns for the first time. Think of it as a blank slate. For this reason, adolescents must perform the functions and tasks themselves, especially when their histories have not demanded these behaviors in the past. Avoid "classroom-style" skills development and focus instead on real-life activities.</p>
<p><i>Knowing thyself</i></p>	<p>Recognizing your own biases in working with adolescents is critical to being successful. Your experiences might be very similar or very different from the youth with whom you are working. Separate out what you believe from what the youth believes. Support and validate the youth's own beliefs and experiences.</p>
<p><i>Modeling interaction</i></p>	<p>Your interactions with the adolescent will represent the model with which they interact with others in their lives. This includes the adolescent as a parent, student, consumer, client, advocate, etc.</p>

## ***It's Not Just About You and the Youth—Don't Forget the Birth Family***

As you are working hard to engage the youth, keep in mind that there may be family members willing to help care for the youth or provide insight as to the strengths the youth possesses. Use the resources that are available to you.

As you discovered in the e-learning, the *Fostering Connections Act* now provides additional protections to support older youth in staying connected with relatives. According to the Fostering Connections Resource Center, Section 103 of the Act (P.L. 110-351)—

*[R]equires states “within 30 days after the removal of a child from the custody of the parent” to “exercise due diligence to identify and provide notice to all adult grandparents and other adult relatives of the child.” Moreover, the state must inform relatives of their options “to participate in the care and placement of the child” including the requirements “to become a foster family home and the additional services and supports that are available for children placed in such a home.” The act also allows child welfare agencies to obtain state and federal child support data to help locate children's parents and other relatives.*

*As Kevin Campbell, founder of the Center for Family Finding and Youth Connectedness, has stated, the connection between child and birth family is both crucial and urgent because a child in out-of-home foster care “is alone and should not be subjected to further preventable relationship losses.” Obviously, he continues, the youth's safety and well-being are of paramount importance, and “prospective relative connections and non-relative supports must be assessed for background information and suitability prior to initiating the hope of connections for the child or young person.*

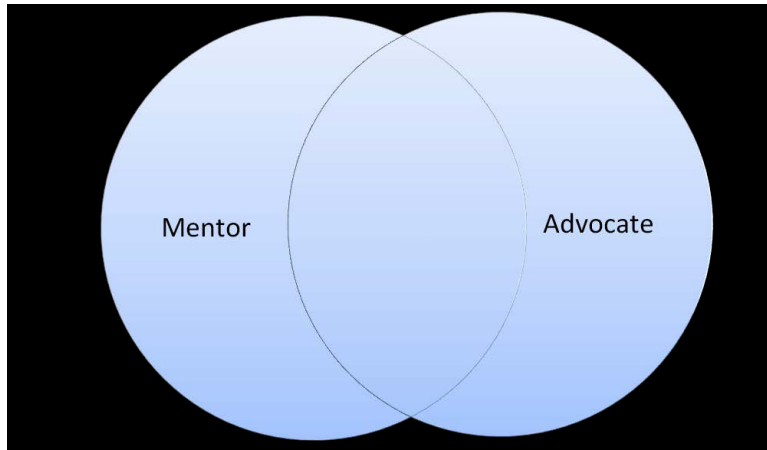
*In addition, Section 203 of the same law “requires states to make “reasonable efforts...to place siblings removed from their home in the same foster care, kinship guardianship or adoptive placement...and in the case of siblings removed from their home who are not jointly placed, to provide frequent visitation or other ongoing interaction between the siblings.”*

Note that while the act states that all of these activities should take place “within 30 days after the removal of a child from the custody of the parent,” it is a good idea to continue to reevaluate connections with relatives for all older youth.

Culture impacts everything we do because it is one lens through which we view the world. As you saw in the e-learning, culture goes beyond race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and nationality. Other cultures may include the culture of foster care, the culture of poverty, modern youth culture or a school-based culture (as opposed to an office-based culture).

## Mentor vs. Advocate

As the youth for whom you advocate get older and your work increasingly encourages self-advocacy and independent living, the line between mentor and volunteer advocate may seem to change and become less clear. However, there are some significant differences between the roles of mentor and volunteer advocate.



Mentoring involves developing a personal relationship with a youth, being a buddy and serving as a role model. Advocating involves learning about the youth's needs and wishes and serving as a voice for the older child's best interest within the child protection system and the courts. As a CASA volunteer, you will continue to serve in your role following the same standards and practices you learned regarding advocating for the best interest of a child:

- **Investigation:** Volunteers carry out an objective, systematic examination of the situation, including relevant history, environment, relationships and needs of the adolescent youth.
- **Facilitation:** Volunteers identify resources and services for the adolescent youth and facilitate a collaborative relationship between all parties on the case, helping to create a situation in which the youth's needs are met.
- **Advocacy:** Volunteers speak up for and plead the case of the adolescent youth for whom they are appointed.
- **Monitoring:** Volunteers keep track of whether the orders of the court, as well as the plans of the treatment team, are carried out. They report back to the court and work with the treatment team when any of the parties do not follow those orders and plans.

However, as you saw in the e-learning, the volunteer advocate's role in working with an older youth shifts to ensuring that resources and services are in place to prepare the youth for successful independent living. Because services are so crucial to this vulnerable population, your role in advocating for the youth to obtain needed services is critical to the ultimate outcome.

Further, the youth's plan for permanence should include provisions for a long-term connection to at least one committed and caring adult. This is a youth-driven decision. Foster parents, teachers, community leaders, relatives, neighbors and service providers are just a few of the adults who might be capable of and

willing to take on this role. In short, you are helping youth create webs of support and interdependency that will increase their success as they transition into adulthood.

### ***Tips for Volunteers***

- Move planning discussions away from concern with temporary placement issues and behavior management of teens toward long-term planning for education and employment.
- Promote ways for foster parents, family members and service providers to support teens.
- Connect teens with a network of adults to help them with education and employment.
- Give family members and teens opportunities to build relationships by focusing together on the future.
- Integrate foster youth into the larger community.



## Overview of Possible Selves

In the e-learning component, you learned about possible selves, or positive youth development. In this approach, youth are viewed as a *resource*. Youth become involved in every aspect of their care and in all phases of their transition to independent living.

Possible selves, as mentioned in the e-learning, is a way of getting youth to engage in their own lives by having them visualize a positive self-identity to work toward. Using this future self view as a guidepost, youth can begin to map out the connections between the present and the future. That is, they can connect their current activities and behaviors with their hopes and fears for the future. Having this roadmap can help guide behaviors and actions and serve as a powerful motivator to reach goals. According to Daphna Oyserman of the University of Michigan:

*The term possible self has been coined to describe incorporation of future goals into self-concept; possible selves are positive and negative images of the self already in a future state—the “clever” self who passed the algebra test, the “fat” self who failed to lose weight, the “fast” self who fell in with the “wrong” crowd. Failure to attain possible selves may increase risk of depression and there is some evidence that well-being and performance improve when possible selves are brought to mind. But clearly we do not always function in an ‘imagine it and you will be it’ kind of world; possible selves do not always sustain self-regulatory action. In spite of possible selves, youth sometime fail algebra, gain undesired weight and engage in behaviors they themselves would prefer to avoid.*

Source: Oyserman, D. “Possible Selves: Identity-Based Motivation and School Success,” *Self-Processes, Learning and Enabling Human Potential* (pp. 269-288). (2008) Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing Inc. and the Montana Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

The Possible Selves model consists of six steps:

1. **Discovering:** Helps the youth answer the question, “What are my strengths and interests?” The goal is to find an area in which each young person has had positive experiences and about which he or she is willing to share.
2. **Thinking:** Is designed to help answer the question, “Who am I?” Youth are asked to think about their hopes for the future.
3. **Sketching:** Helps answer the question, “What am I like and what are my possible selves?” Youth are asked to describe themselves as well as their hopes and fears for the future.
4. **Reflecting:** Helps answer the question, “What can I be?” It provides an opportunity to evaluate conditions of the youth’s current circumstance and to set goals for the future.
5. **Planning:** Helps answer the question, “How can I reach my goals?” It is utilized to start thinking about specific ways to attain identified goals. A well-developed action plan should be created. The action plan will list a specific hope, a short-term goal underpinning the hope, the specific tasks that must be completed to reach the goal and a timeline for completing all of the tasks. The action plan provides a pathway to support the attainment of long-term goals and hopes for the future.

**6. Performing:** Helps answer the question, “How am I doing?” During this phase, the goals and action plans are revisited regularly. Task completion is reviewed, goals and action plans are modified, goal attainment is celebrated, new goals are added, and hopes, expectations and fears are continually examined.

Source: Hock, M., Schumaker, J. & Deshler, D. *Possible Selves*. (2003) Lawrence, KS: Edge Enterprises, Inc.

## ***Positive Peer Relationships***

University of Michigan researcher Daphna Oyserman wrote that “in under-resourced contexts, [positive] possible selves and strategies to attain them are unlikely to be automatically cued; these contexts are less likely to present easily accessible models to guide success. Youth are more likely to encounter adults who are unemployed, have low academic attainment and hold non-professional jobs.”

In short, many of the situations and contexts from which youth in foster care come do not easily lend themselves to positive role modeling. In his op-ed article to the *New York Times*, Richard Nisbett wrote about one effort to address concerns about the lack of role models and worried about social acceptance. He cited the power of positive peer influence at Northeastern University. In this example, black underclassmen on a majority white campus were given a detailed report of a survey showing that upperclassmen who were once worried about feeling accepted on campus eventually came to realize they were indeed able to feel at home on campus. The underclassmen given this report about the experiences of their peers were found to work harder on their schoolwork, to contact professors more and to demonstrate stronger academic performance in grade point average.

Let us now turn to the power of peer-to-peer networking in improving outcomes and creating a healthy social safety net for aging-out youth.

Many young people rely on technology today in order to stay connected. Through media such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Blogspot and BlackPlanet, the internet is increasingly used as a primary form of communication by young people to share information and connect with other youth with similar interests.

FosterClub offers a powerful tool for youth to connect with other young people in care from all across the country, and you are strongly encouraged to introduce your youth to this tool. You may also wish to use it yourself as there is a forum for adults working with youth in foster care. However, we’d be remiss if we didn’t touch on face-to-face peer-to-peer social networking. As a foster youth alumna recently stated to the designers of this curriculum:

*I have seen first-hand the power of a room full of foster youth. [CASA volunteers should be] aware of local foster youth boards or groups [which can] open up a new world of peer-to-peer support. Many youth don't want to have anything to do with the system or independent living program, so introducing them to foster youth programs outside of the system would give them a different way to connect.*

## ***A Note About Security***

Safety and security in an online environment should always be taken into consideration when engaging in online communication and social networking. The FosterClub message boards prohibit the sharing of any personal information (including home addresses, email addresses, pictures or links to other sites). The website has the following note posted specifically for “supportive adults”:

*The team at FosterClub strives to maintain the safest site possible while allowing young people enough freedom and flexibility to reap the benefits of sharing in a peer support network online.*

*In order to allow users the immediacy that they have come to expect from online social networks, the FosterClub team uses a monitoring approach that allows users to post messages without being screened first. Our team does monitor the site consistently and also relies on our users to report inappropriate posts. Our years of experience with FosterClub.com has demonstrated that our young users tend to be protective of this site, understand Internet safety and demonstrate excellent role modeling by disparaging those who post inappropriately.*

Source: [fosterclub.com/article/fosterclub-safety-rules](http://fosterclub.com/article/fosterclub-safety-rules) (Accessed October 31, 2011)

## ***National CASA’s Guidelines for Online Communication and Social Media for Staff and Volunteers***

Recall boundary issues discussed earlier, volunteers and staff should not link to personal pages (or become online “friends”) of families or children they may encounter in their capacity with the CASA/GAL program. This includes instant messenger names, blogs, photo-sharing sites and social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and YouTube. In addition, many programs prohibit volunteers from giving their email address or cell phone number to the child(ren) or family members on any case to which they are assigned.

## **Youth in Court**

### ***Benefits When Youth Participate***

Attending court benefits both youth and the court. Youth have the opportunity to understand the process by seeing the court proceeding in person. They also develop a sense of control over the process when they actively participate. The court learns more about children than simply what is presented in reports.

#### **Sense of Control**

When youth are removed from their homes, they generally have little control over why or when that occurs, where they go and what happens to their parents. Important things in their lives are taken away, including the ability to make decisions. They are generally placed in a new home with new caregivers and siblings, go to a new school and have to develop new friends. All of these events are beyond their control. Youth are told there will be a court hearing at which a judge, whom they may never have met, will decide whether they will return home. Sometimes a child advocate identifies a youth’s needs and conveys his or her best interests to the court. But when youth are not in court, they may simply be told the outcome and then either continue in the foster home or return to the birth family.

If the goal of the child welfare system is to do what is in the best interests of the child, the child should have input. When youth have adequate representation, they are informed of the process and their role.

When youth attend a court hearing, they sense that the judge who is deciding their best interests has listened to them. Regardless of the outcome, youth have reported that simply being heard by the decision maker empowers them and gives them a sense of control over what is happening to them. They feel they have a part to play and can influence the outcome.

### Understanding the Process

In an ideal situation, the youth has good representation, the social worker regularly communicates with the youth, the birth parents are honest with the youth about the situation, and the foster parents are present in court and openly discuss the case with the youth. However, a youth may not fully understand what is happening without seeing it firsthand. The youth is told that critical decisions are made by a judge in court. Yet in many instances the youth is not involved in that component of the case. When youth attend court, they can ask the advocate questions about what is happening. They hear what the social worker says about their home, school, visitation with parents, etc. They hear what their parents say about their progress. When the judge makes a ruling and discusses why she or he orders something, the youth hears it firsthand and can ask questions.

### Information for the Court

Many questions that the court will have about the case may be addressed in reports by the child welfare agency and child advocate, in parent testimony and in input from other service providers. However, if the court has a question about how often the youth has seen her mother or how the youth is doing in school, the youth can provide the answer.

As with every in-person interaction, having the youth in court makes the case more real for the judge. For example, the court may be deciding whether it is time to change the permanency plan to adoption because the parents haven't complied with the agency's family service plan. If the youth is in court, the court doesn't have to rely on the reports to see how long the child has been in care. The court can see that the child is getting older and needs permanency in his or her life. Indeed, the youth may say this directly to the judge. Even if the youth is not verbal, the court can observe how the youth appears and interacts with others.

If the youth is very young and cannot speak to the judge, being present in court will bring the case to life and help show the case is about a human being with wants, needs, desires and hopes that should be considered. When youth attend the hearing, the court is less likely to focus excessively on the parents' circumstances as opposed to the youth's needs. When only the parents attend court, the focus is on what they have and have not accomplished. When the youth is present, there is equal attention on the youth and what the youth needs.

## ***Considerations About Types of Involvement in Court***

There is no single rule or process that governs a youth's presence and participation in court. However, for older youth in care preparing for adulthood, it is especially critical that they attend and actively participate in court hearings. If it is not feasible or preferable for the youth to participate in the entire hearing, consider the following options:

Have the Youth Present Throughout the Hearing.

In most hearings for older youth, it will be appropriate to have a youth present for the whole hearing, without restricting testimony and information that she or he may hear.

Present the Youth's Testimony in Chambers.

If the youth does not feel comfortable attending entire hearings, consider requesting that the youth meet with the judge in chambers. This opportunity provides the youth with a voice directly to the judge and protects him or her from any potential damage from seeing abusive parents or hearing negative information about parents. Most jurisdictions allow in-chambers meetings between the judge and the youth. All lawyers and a court reporter can be present, and all discussions can be on the record. Recording the interaction protects the parties who are not permitted in chambers (e.g., the parents) by informing them what information the youth has shared.

Allow the Youth to Leave the Courtroom if Desired.

In some instances, youth do not wish to see parents or hear some details about their case. They should be involved to the extent they are comfortable.

## ***Determining Whether the Child Will Come to Court***

The presumption should be that the youth will attend court to some extent for all of the reasons stated above. However, there are factors to consider when determining whether the youth will come and how to make the experience most meaningful.

*What are the youth's wishes?* This is the most important question. Most youth have definite feelings about whether they want to attend court. Youth should not be forced to attend the hearing. But if the youth wants to go, every effort must be made to ensure that happens.

*What type of hearing is scheduled?* Some hearings lend themselves to youth participation more than others. If there is a hearing dealing with a legal issue that has little impact on the youth, it may make more sense for the youth to not attend. However, if the hearing concerns visitation with parents or long-term permanency plans, the youth's attendance will be vital.

*How old is the youth?* Some states place age restrictions on youth attending hearings. However, many states *require or strongly presume* attendance for youth over age 12. An older youth can be an information resource for the judge, and it is essential to involve youth in planning for his or her adulthood.

*What is the developmental level of the youth?* Regardless of age, consideration should be given to whether or not the youth understand what is happening during the hearing.

*Will attending court upset the youth?* Abuse and neglect hearings can contain graphic details of abuse that may be troubling for the youth to hear. On the other hand, older youth especially may be very aware of what was happening that caused removal. It may be therapeutic for youth to be exposed to the realities of the situation and hear people being held accountable for their actions. Excluding youth from court can be equally (if not more) upsetting, by stripping youth of the opportunity to come to terms with their past and move on and by precluding youth from having a sense of involvement in and control over the charting of their future.

*Will attending court disrupt the youth's routine?* Generally court proceedings occur during regular school hours. Often multiple cases are scheduled for one day. Youth have to wait until their cases are called, sometimes for hours. School, sports and other extracurricular activities may be disrupted. Yet this concern is not insurmountable. If we value youth participation, scheduling issues and conflicts can be addressed the same way we juggle other important commitments in a youth's life, such as doctor or dentist appointments.

*Will court be confusing or boring to the youth?* Some courtrooms do not have child-friendly waiting areas, and the youth have to bring something to do while they wait. Also, there must be supervision for the youth while waiting. During the hearing, attorneys and judges use words and concepts that the youth may not understand. Youth have to remain quiet and attentive during hearings that can be long and boring to them if they do not understand what is happening. Ensure that the youth has been told what issues will be discussed. Also, allow the youth to bring a glossary of legal terms (see below) to help them understand the language used.

*Who will transport the youth?* Transportation should never be a reason to exclude a youth from participating. Most courts rely on the child welfare agency and foster parents or relatives to transport the youth to and from court. In many cases, youth are placed far from the courthouse and transporting them can be time-consuming and inconvenient. Everyone involved in the youth's case, including the CASA volunteer, can be helpful in finding creative ways to transport. The youth's foster parents have the right to be present and can bring the youth.

*Will the court need additional time for the hearings?* When youth are actively involved in their hearing, the proceeding may take longer. The youth may want to update the court on their status and express any concerns. The judge may also want to spend extra time interacting with the youth who has taken the time to attend court.

## ***Supporting Youth Through Court Hearings***

### **Before Court Hearings**

Most of the concerns that professionals have about youth attending their court hearings can be addressed with proper preparation. The CASA volunteer should play a vital role in preparing the youth.

- Determine whether the youth wants to attend court. Explain that the youth can speak directly with the judge—or attend only a portion of the hearing if they would prefer.
- Decide whether the youth should attend the entire hearing or be excused for certain portions.
- Provide the youth with at least two weeks' notice of the hearing.

- Assist, or ask the case worker to assist, the youth with making arrangements with school: Will they miss a class? Can they speak to a particular teacher? Can you call the school to inform them of the absence and ask about school work? Remind youth that they may have to wait for a couple of hours and to bring school work or other things to occupy their time.
- Discuss who will be present at the hearing and what their roles are.
- Arrange an advanced visit to the courthouse. If possible, introduce the youth to the judge who makes the decisions in their case. Show the youth the courtroom and explain where everyone sits and what everyone does.
- Explain your role in the court hearing and that you have to advocate for the youth's best interests. Explain that you will also tell the judge what the youth wants.
- Explain the purpose and goals of the particular hearing and how it fits into the rest of the case. Explain what you expect to happen or what the possible outcomes could be.
- Let the youth know what you are communicating and recommending in your report to the court.
- Ask the case worker to go over the child welfare agency's report to the court (or let the youth read it) and find out whether the youth has any responses, disagreements or questions.
- Find out what the youth wants the judge to know.
- Help the youth prepare for court, including what to wear, how to act and what to say. Speak specifically about what they want the judge to know, and practice how to say those things.
- Determine whether the youth wants a supportive person present during the hearing.
- Ensure that arrangements are made to bring the youth to the hearing.

### **During Court Hearings**

The youth may not know many people who are present and may look to you for support during the hearing.

- Ensure that the youth's lawyer (if applicable) knows that you are present and can be supportive.
- If the youth wants to be excused for portions of the hearing, tell the lawyer or the judge.
- If the youth wants to speak to the judge, tell the lawyer or judge.
- If the youth gets upset during the hearing and asks to leave, take the youth out and answer any questions he or she has.
- When the next hearing is being set, ask the youth whether she or he is available for that day and time. Youth who participate in scheduling are more likely to attend.

## **After Court Hearings**

Court hearings can be confusing. The youth may not be sure what the judge ordered.

- After the hearing, ask the lawyer to speak with the youth to answer any questions.
- Even if the youth does not have questions right away, ensure that she or he knows what was ordered, what will happen next and when the next court hearing will take place.
- If available, review the court order with the youth. If not, you, the lawyer or case worker should make arrangements to contact the youth at a later time to review it and discuss any questions that come up after reflecting on the hearing.
- Encourage youth to contact you with questions.
- Ensure that the case worker contacts the caregiver after the hearing to inform them of anything that happened during the hearing that may have had an impact on the youth.
- Ensure that the case worker contacts the youth's therapist to provide information that might be relevant to the youth's treatment.

## ***An Important Note About Shared Decision Making and the Law***

Two federal laws place a major focus on youth empowerment, especially for older youth in foster care. Since 2006, under the *Child and Family Services Improvement Act*, all states must have procedural safeguards in place to ensure that in all dependency court hearings, including "any hearing regarding the transition of the child from foster care to independent living," the court consults "in an age-appropriate manner, with the child regarding the proposed permanency or transition plan for the child." 42 U.S.C. § 675(5). Therefore, it is essential that you advocate for youth to attend court hearings.

You learned about the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act* when you completed the e-learning. Remember that according to this law the development of a new, specific Transition Plan is required. It must be developed at least 90 days prior to the youth's transition out of foster care (at age 18 or older). This is over and above the independent living plan that should begin at age 16 or sooner. The new plan should be personalized, detailed and developed with the caseworker and *other appropriate representatives*. The plan should be as detailed as the youth directs and include specifics on housing, health insurance, education, opportunities for mentors and continuing support services, workforce supports and employment services. As these transition plans are developed, be sure to ask yourself whether the youth has been sufficiently involved in his or her own advocacy and whether the youth has been the driving force behind the plan. What steps will you take to ensure that older youth are meaningfully involved in transition planning and court hearings?