

Quality Improvement Center on Engaging Youth in Finding Permanency

Funded by the United States Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Children's Bureau, beginning in October 2021, the **Quality Improvement Center on Engaging Youth in Finding Permanency (QIC-EY)** is charged with advancing child welfare programs and practice to ensure that they are authentically engaging and empowering children and youth in foster care throughout the U.S., especially in relation to permanency decisions. It is expected that the components and impact of the QIC-EY will bring about systemic changes in how children and youth are authentically engaged as reflected in intentional policy, practice, and culture shifts in the 6-8 pilot sites.

The QIC-EY is a five-year, cooperative agreement led by Spaulding for Children in partnership with the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC), the New England Association of Child Welfare Commissioners and Directors (NEACWCD), the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) and the University of Washington (UW).

The Problem

Despite the express desire of children and youth and their right to have a say in decisions that impact them, child welfare practice has neither historically nor currently centered on youth voice or engagement. Studies in the U.S. and other countries consistently have found that children and youth in foster care felt they had "limited opportunities to be involved in important decisions made about their lives, such as where they live and when and how often they see their parents." Furthermore, when given the opportunity to participate, youths reported that they felt unprepared, confused, voiceless and lacking an influence on decisions being made.

The child welfare system is designed to prioritize protecting children and youth, often at the expense of understanding and engaging them. The important work of protecting vulnerable children and youth often can be rooted in an imbalance of power in which the professional has most, if not all, of the power and the children and youth have little or none. This can result in child welfare professionals unintentionally deciding "what is best" for children and youth rather than collaborating with them to determine what will help them thrive. Moving from a system that views children and youth in foster care as victims to one that engages them as partners in the decision-making process involves a momentous cultural shift that impacts not only practice, but also policy, programming and laws.

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Professionals might THINK they're making a good decision for the youth, but it may unintentionally make things worse if they are not listening to the youth's needs and wants.

MACI KEAN, MEMBER, QIC-EY NATIONAL YOUTH
ENGAGEMENT ADVISORY COUNCIL

¹Saunders, R., & Mace, S. (2006). Agency policy and the participation of children and young people in the child protection process. *Child Abuse Review*, 15(2), 89–109.

²Cashmore, J. (2002). Promoting the participation of children and young people in care. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 26, 837–847.

³Freundlich, M., Avery, R. J., & Padgett, D. (2007). Preparation of youth in congregate care for independent living. *Child & Family Social Work*, 12(1), 64–72.

The Pathway to Solutions

Ensuring that children and youth in care are engaged authentically, particularly in relation to permanency, requires a paradigm shift in how the child welfare system understands children and youth and views their involvement in decision-making. Children and youth need to be seen as competent, knowledgeable experts who are partners in decisions about their lives, especially those related to legal, cultural and relational permanency.



Often times, youth are silenced through programs, case workers, separation, and extensive uncertainties. We can change this by allowing youth to be seen, heard and listened to and providing youth with the tools and support to become part of the team and decision-making process. No one understands what a child has been through or needs more than the child themselves. Systems need to allow children to dream again, to believe, and most importantly to be the voice of the unspoken.

TAWANNA BROWN, MEMBER, QIC-EY NATIONAL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT ADVISORY COUNCIL

The QIC-EY will address changes necessary at both the systemic and workforce levels to support a vital shift in philosophy and practice nationwide by doing the following:

Train and Coach

1. Produce a training and coaching model that can be used to shift mindset, practice and culture of the child welfare workforce and courts. Once piloted and evaluated, the new training and coaching model will become a free resource available across the nation.

Implement and Evaluate

2. Implement and evaluate models for engaging children and youth in decision-making. Lessons learned will be disseminated nationally to inform practice, policies and laws regarding how child welfare systems engage children and youth, especially in respect to permanency.

Transform Systems

3. Work with sites (states, counties, tribal nations and territories) to make systemic changes aimed at transforming system culture; increasing knowledge, attitude and skills; and developing infrastructure to ensure that authentic youth engagement is included in all aspects of a child welfare system.

To accomplish its goals, the QIC-EY will partner with six to eight pilot sites (states, counties, tribal nations and territories). These sites will be selected during the first year of the initiative. They will receive support and resources from the QIC to implement a youth engagement model, a training and coaching model for the child welfare workforce and a training on youth engagement for courts. They also will receive QIC support and resources to make systemic changes in how they authentically engage children and youth. The information gained from these pilot sites will help to transform how children and youth are engaged authentically in child welfare systems throughout the nation.

To find out more about this project, contact: Melinda Lis, Project Director, at mlis@spaulding.org.

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