



QUALITATIVE STUDIES:
FOSTER YOUTH SEEN AND HEARD
(PROJECT *FYSH*)

FY 2008 FINAL REPORT
TO THE ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF
CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

Dayna Finet

June 2008

CHILDREN AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTER

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University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

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I think I would be a great Foster Parent. I would love and respect each child as if they were my own. I would give them a warm safe environment to enjoy, I would let them be kids without living in fear. Give them a chance to know what real love feels like between a parent and child.

I would teach them to love and respect others. Teach them helpful life skills and to always find something positive even in negative situations.

I will always be willing to listen to their problems and offer positive advice...or just listen. I would make sure they were always in clean clothes and fed.

Most importantly, I want them to know that they have a home. That somebody LOVES them and always will love them and care for them. I wouldn't let them feel unwanted because I think that's one of the worst things to let a child feel.

I would make a great foster mother because I have a lot to give. I would do it for free. I just want to help children know that someone DOES love them.

... Amanda, 20 years old

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Executive Summary

In 2003, the Children and Family Research Center introduced *Foster Youth Seen and Heard* (Project *FYSH*), a unique qualitative complement to its extensive body of quantitative research on child welfare in Illinois. Since inception, Project *FYSH* has helped researchers, child welfare professionals, policy makers, and the public understand with greater clarity the subjective meaning of life in care through the perspective of older youth and young adults who have been there. The past year has involved significant change in the *FYSH* program, all intended to approach data collection and analysis more systematically and to integrate the work of *FYSH* more directly within the Center's overall research agenda.

Throughout the year, a series of *FYSH* workshops used written, audio taped, and video taped personal narratives to explore three major themes which align with the Department's vision for the future of child welfare in Illinois. First, *FYSH* workshops sought personal narratives of participants' experiences prior to and during entrance into the child welfare system. Second, workshop exercises focused on participants' recollection of their time in foster care. A third *FYSH* theme involved personal narratives of leaving care through reunification, adoption, guardianship, or emancipation. Consistently throughout the workshops, *FYSH* participants also emphasized the effects of foster care on their personal identities, values, and expectations for their adult lives. In these very personal narratives, *FYSH* offers insight to the very human implications of life as a ward of the state, which DCFS, as substitute "parent" can use to better understand and care for the young people it serves.

On the theme of life prior to and upon entry into care, *FYSH* narratives described conditions in homes of origin that validate the need for child protective services and in cases, placement in substitute care. *FYSH* participants also revealed the significant ongoing influence of family—especially biological mothers but siblings and extended families as well. Narratives about the second main topic, experiences while in foster care, mostly described these as disruptive, unstable, and emotionally painful. Yet some narratives of time in care expressed appreciation for foster parents, and for experiences that led to greater personal growth. Narratives on the third theme, leaving care, most commonly dealt with adoption. Most described post-adoptive experiences as more negative than positive and in some cases, as extremely unhappy. Very few of the narratives produced in *FYSH* workshops dealt with guardianship, and few of the participants actually aged out of care since many had been adopted or remained in foster care during their time with the project. Finally, a significant emphasis on the theme of personal identity emerged through *FYSH* participants' narratives. It is encouraging that these data describe the positive influence of experiences in foster care for the development of a robust and resilient perception of self, yet of concern that they also reflect some feelings of ongoing emotional trauma linked to status as a foster child.

In FY 2009, the Center expects that its qualitative research will expand geographically and to include a broader sampling of participants. We also anticipate closer integration of qualitative work, including Project *FYSH*, into the Center's overall research agenda. While maintaining a component of open-ended qualitative research, we will prioritize the investigation of specific research questions and mixed method research design, linked to existing quantitative data and the Department's vision for the future of child welfare in Illinois. Finally, plans for the Center's

qualitative efforts in FY 2009 include wider dissemination of results through relevant publications, presentations, and the Center's website.

Purpose and Objectives

Overwhelmingly, knowledge about child welfare and foster care has come from the investigation of quantitative data. This source of information has produced invaluable insight into child safety, the stability and continuity of life for young people in care, factors affecting permanence of family life, and the well-being of children and youth who are wards of the state.

Although vital, quantitative data cannot tell us anything about the subjective experiences of life in the child welfare system—how children and youth in foster care make sense of it, and what it means to them. Recognizing the importance of these perspectives, in 2003 the Center started *Foster Youth Seen and Heard* (Project *FYSH*) to collect the personal stories of older foster youth and young adults formerly in care. From its beginning and continuing into the current year, the *FYSH* project has provided a structured and supportive opportunity for self expression about life in foster care. Additionally, *FYSH* makes the perspectives of foster children and youth more available to researchers, child welfare professionals, policy makers, and the concerned public. Evaluations of the program have demonstrated that both the opportunity for self expression and a chance to influence positive change motivate participants to join Project *FYSH* and continue with the program.

In FY 2008 and continuing into FY 2009, these initial goals of *FYSH* have remained important. In addition, during FY 2008 the Center began to transition *FYSH* into a broader and more systematic program of research, and piloted this new approach to *FYSH* in Champaign County during fall 2007 and spring 2008. The in-depth qualitative data on foster care experience collected through Project *FYSH*

represents a unique and crucial complement to the Center's existing analysis of primarily quantitative administrative and survey data.

Based on results of a comprehensive *FYSH* evaluation conducted in FY 2007, the objectives accomplished for Project *FYSH* during FY 2008 included these:

- Restructure Project *FYSH* from an employment-based service program into a focused research effort based on customary qualitative research techniques, and pilot this new methodology, through a series of four five-session workshops, throughout Champaign County;
- Recruit between 16 and 24 *FYSH* participants throughout Champaign County (for the pilot study), each of whom would complete at least one five-session *FYSH* workshop during FY 2008;
- Develop a methodology for systematically analyzing the qualitative data produced through Project *FYSH*; and
- Increase dissemination of findings from Project *FYSH* through refereed publications, policy briefs, presentations to relevant research, practice, and policy audiences and the CFRC website.

In FY 2009 *FYSH* research will continue to build on progress achieved in FY 2008. Objectives for the coming year include these:

- Expand *FYSH* data collection beyond Champaign County;

- Introduce *FYSH* to a broader range of research participants, including youth/young adults who are experiencing severe problems in the transition to adulthood, wards younger than 16, and other family members;
- Develop focused research questions for qualitative investigation based on analysis of FY 2008 *FYSH* data and other existing CFRC research findings;
- Develop focused research questions for qualitative investigation based on the Department's vision for the future of child welfare in Illinois; and
- Continue to expand dissemination of *FYSH* findings through relevant publications, presentations, and the CFRC website.

Methodology

Qualitative research can assume a variety of forms, which might include interviewing, focus groups, direct and participant observation, ethnography, and case study. Although containing some elements of these other methods, Project *FYSH* relies most on the collection and analysis of personal narrative as its primary data source. The unique value of narrative research rests in its capacity to reveal meanings generated by research participants—rather than researchers—and to express those meanings in participants’ own words. This narrative approach thus aligns especially well with the purposes of Project *FYSH*. This section of the report summarizes the methodology used in the *FYSH* project, describing participants in the research, instrumentation used to solicit *FYSH* narratives, procedures for conducting the research, and the process used to analyze *FYSH* data.

FYSH participants. Through the course of FY 2008, Project *FYSH* involved a total of ten participants. Eligible to join *FYSH* were youth and young adults who had spent any amount of time in any type of foster care, regardless of later reunification, adoption, guardianship, or emancipation status. Among participants, four had become adopted, all experiencing some later degree of estrangement from their adoptive families. One participant reunified with the biological mother, one aged out of care, and the other four remained in foster care during their involvement with *FYSH*. None of the ten participants dropped out of the project, and each of them completed all five workshop sessions. They received retail gift cards, a customary incentive for research participation, for their involvement with *FYSH*.

In general, *FYSH* participants ranged from 16 to 20 years of age, but the workshops also included one young woman of 25 and another who was 29 years old.

Nine of ten *FYSH* participants were female, and one male. Caucasians counted for four of the ten *FYSH* participants, with five African Americans and one workshop member with an African American and a Hispanic parent.

Five of the *FYSH* participants had obtained high school diplomas or a GED. Of these, two were attending community college and one was preparing to begin her four-year post-secondary studies. Three of the *FYSH* participants remained enrolled in high school during the workshops, with one preparing to complete a GED. None of the *FYSH* participants held full-time jobs, but two of them worked part-time. Three had faced juvenile detention during their time in care.

During the course of the year, the *FYSH* workshops included one married participant, one widow, and one woman who had been divorced and was engaged to be remarried. Two participants, both single during their involvement in the workshops, later became engaged. Others, including younger members of the workshops, were single, dating, or with an unknown relational status. Four of the women who joined *FYSH* workshops had children, the youngest two months and the oldest four years. Two women were pregnant, one of them already the mother of a three-year-old. *FYSH* workshops also included two sibling pairs (one brother and sister, the other two sisters).

The *FYSH* researchers took a number of measures to guarantee the protection of all project participants.

One risk of participation in *FYSH* could be feelings of emotional distress when recalling difficult memories or current problems. To minimize this risk, we made guaranteed that participants could decline to join in any activity if they felt uncomfortable, and could excuse themselves from a session if any discussion caused them distress. We also made available contact information for the *FYSH* director,

the Center's Associate Director, and support resources in the community in case participants wanted to discuss any concerns that arose in connection with their involvement in FYSH. We also checked in with each participant at the conclusion of each workshop session, to address any potential concerns.

A second possible risk of participation in FYSH could involve breach of privacy if others revealed confidential information disclosed during workshop sessions. To reduce this risk, we required participants to agree in writing to maintain confidentiality and reserved the right to ask those in violation to leave the study. All audio and video tapes were transcribed, with each participant given an alias, and then stored securely in the FYSH director's office. Consent and assent procedures made it clear that no audio or video recordings from FYSH sessions would be disseminated in any form.

Instrumentation. Each of the three workshops conducted during FY 2008 consisted of five sessions. A manual (included in the Appendix to this report) used during these sessions was the primary instrument for collection of *FYSH* narrative data. For the first four sessions of each workshop, the manual presented both structured and unstructured writing exercises, designed to elicit narrative recollections, which participants completed during the session. After each exercise, participants had the opportunity to read and discuss their written narratives within the group. Audio recordings of these discussions provided a second source of narrative data, supplementing written texts. To facilitate expression among participants not as comfortable with writing, manual exercises used at the workshops' fifth session focused on the creation of interactive, video taped narratives by workshop participants. These video taped narratives represented a third type of qualitative data produced during *FYSH* workshops.

Following each workshop, participants received invitations to provide additional data during two 90-minute follow up interviews. Data collection during interview sessions relied on two questionnaires (displayed in the Appendix). The first of these sought participants' in-depth reaction to their engagement with Project *FYSH*, and also included individual-specific items focused on themes each participant had emphasized in workshop writings and discussions. A second questionnaire asked participants about beneficial personal effects of writing about and discussing their experiences in foster care. Interviews were audio taped and their transcriptions served as an additional source of *FYSH* data analyzed by the research team.

Procedure. Upon the completion of the *FYSH* research design and human subjects approval from the University and the Department, *FYSH* researchers began participant recruitment. Prior to FY 2008, *FYSH* participants (then hourly employees of the Center) came primarily from one local agency program (the Independent Living Program at Cunningham Children's Home in Urbana). In previous years, a few *FYSH* participants also came into the program through word-of-mouth.

To make *FYSH* more representative of youth and young adults experienced with foster care, in FY 2008 the project recruited participants more broadly among all the agencies handling foster care case management in Champaign County—in addition to Cunningham Children's Home, these included the Urbana DCFS office, Catholic Charities, and Lutheran Social Services. Researchers also approached two additional agencies—Generations of Hope in Rantoul and Operation Snowball in Mahomet—because they too had substantial contact with youth in foster care. Finally, because data show relatively high usage of social services by foster care

alumni, recruitment of participants through local agencies also included the county DHS office (for former foster youth using TANF and Food Stamps) and the Champaign-Urbana Public Health Department (for those using Medicaid for themselves or their children). (The county housing authority, for alumni using housing assistance, also was approached but declined to work with the project.) Contact with each agency began with phone and email outreach to agency leadership. Agency heads who responded positively then met in-person with the *FYSH* project director to discuss the program in detail. For most agencies, the *FYSH* director then met with a larger group of agency staff with case management responsibilities to explain the program to them. At these meetings, case managers received fact sheets describing *FYSH* and flyers for distribution to potential participants. Case managers were asked to identify prospective *FYSH* participants and give information about the program to them. Youth under 18 contacted their case manager if interested in further involvement with *FYSH*, while those older than 18 responded straight to the *FYSH* director.

In addition to recruitment through foster care and social service agencies, for the FY 2008 program the Center used paid advertising to attract potential *FYSH* participants. These ads appeared four times prior to the fall and spring workshops in campus newspapers at the University of Illinois and Parkland College. Incidentally, recruitment postings also were placed on an all-campus listserv at the University (no counterpart exists at Parkland) and on the Internet bulletin board craigslist.

Before beginning the program, interested youth and young adults met with the *FYSH* project director for an informational interview. At this interview, those who wished to proceed completed consent forms (with assent forms for minors)

approved by University and Department Institutional Review Boards. For participants under 18, consent also was obtained from the Department's Guardian's Office.

During the fall, workshop sessions were held at a faith-based organization, the McKinley Foundation, in Champaign. The off-site location did not appear to provide any unique benefit to the program, so spring workshops took place in a conference room at the Center.

Prior to each session, the facilitator reminded workshop participants of the meeting through both phone and email messages. During sessions, participants received *FYSH* manuals, notebooks, pens, and other materials. Meetings began with introductions and a reminder of meeting guidelines (such as confidentiality). The four writing sessions each included three main exercises—one unstructured, where participants recorded anything they felt like writing about, and two structured assignments that focused on aspects of experience prior to and upon entering care, during care, and after leaving care. Participants had the opportunity to read and discuss any written work, but were not required to do so. The fifth session, organized around interactive video taping, consisted of two main activities. In the first, workshop participants each interviewed every other participant, asking two questions in each interview. For the second video assignment, each participant taped a personal statement summing up their own perspective on foster care.

Gift cards were distributed at the end of every session. Written and taped narratives were stored in the *FYSH* director's office between sessions.

At the conclusion of each five-session workshop, participants received invitations to participate in two 90-minute, individual follow up interviews. A

member of the Center's qualitative studies research group scheduled and conducted these interviews, which were audio taped.

Data analysis. Written narratives from the *FYSH* workshops required no special preparation prior to analysis. Audio taped and video taped narratives were transcribed before being analyzed.

To analyze narrative data from the *FYSH* project, the Center's qualitative studies group used standard qualitative research procedures. An iterative process, this first required analysts to break down texts into the smallest logical thematic units—for example, narratives that featured the role of biological mothers in *FYSH* participants' experience. In the second step of analysis, thematic units with related content were combined into thematic clusters—for example, units dealing with biological mothers became part of a larger cluster that also included narrative content on biological fathers, siblings, and extended family members. To complete the analysis, these thematic clusters were placed within groups consistent with the Department's three focal areas of foster care experience—prior to and upon entering care, while in care, and after leaving care.

About the Findings

Typically qualitative research produces a large volume of data not as easily condensed as in quantitative work. As expected, the written, audio taped, and video taped *FYSH* narratives provide a great deal of perspective from young people who have experienced time in foster care. In the following sections, we outline primary conclusions drawn from the analysis of *FYSH* data, and illustrate these themes with examples of intact narrative that represent the larger base of qualitative data generated in the past year through Project *FYSH*.

The first group of findings describes conditions at home that made foster care necessary, and *FYSH* participants' memories of coming into care. Undoubtedly, these children were at risk, and needed protection. Still, their original families remain important to them, mothers—though not without some ambivalence—most of all.

A second results section describes the feelings of *FYSH* participants about foster care itself. Overall, this group of foster youth and those formerly in care describe the experience as disruptive and unstable, with foster children and youth feeling sad, scared, and unloved. Some narratives, though, do express an appreciation for people they met in care and for the lessons it offered.

Third, findings summarize this group of *FYSH* participants' reflections on leaving care. Almost half of the *FYSH* participants left care through adoption, and they consistently described their adoptive homes as equally bad, if not worse, than the homes of their families of origin.

Finally, the results of *FYSH* data analysis tell us something about the ways in which foster youth and those formerly living in the child welfare system make

meaning from these experiences. A number of narratives expressed a positive self concept, resilience in the face of difficulty, and anticipation for the future that their experience in foster care helped to inspire. Other *FYSH* participants remained angry and sad about events of their childhoods.

All names contained in this report are pseudonyms.

Findings:

Before and Coming Into Care

It all started when I was in the first grade. I was living with my Mother, Step Dad, Brothers, and Step Siblings. There were eight of us total. Six kids, two adults. We lived in a two bedroom apartment...which we named "The Roach House."

My mother worked all the time. She was never really around. She worked lots of waitressing jobs and she would also prostitute. My step dad made her. He was a druggie....and so was she. Since my mom was gone all the time, her husband was supposed to "take care of us." Instead he would abuse us. CPS later labeled it as torture. That was my life. I knew it was bad but I was only six. At the time, my solution was to run away but fear of gangs and getting kidnapped scared me more than my step dad's sick "games." At least there I was warm...and fed most of the time.

One day at school, I was acting up in art class. I didn't get my way so I was sent to the principal's office. She wanted to send me home. I got so scared. I knew my step dad would beat me harder than ever before. I cried so hard. I told them...well more like begged them not to send me home. The principal asked me "Why shouldn't I send you home?" I wouldn't tell at first but eventually broke and said "Because my step dad will beat me with a bat."

I wasn't sent home. I went back to my classroom to finish making my mothers day gift. I didn't know what was going to happen. I was just relieved to be able to stay at school.

Later that day we were eating dinner when two police cars and CPS shows up. Right then, I knew exactly what was going on. Us kids were packed into a car and taken to this building. I don't have any idea what it was called or what it looked like.

They told us that we would be finding new homes. My step sisters and step brothers were first to leave. I don't remember saying good bye. My older brother went to my aunt's house. Since R [] and I were the youngest we went to our Grandmas house until we could join our older brother at our Aunts. (Amanda)

Without exception, the narratives related by *FYSH* participants underscored the necessity for child protective services and its vital role in protecting children's safety. For most of the participants, entry into the child welfare system occurred after they faced severe neglect, most commonly due to alcohol or drug abuse, and often both, that made parents incapable of caring for their children's basic needs. Tragically, *FYSH* participants also described more serious physical and sexual abuse as well.

My biological mother. Let me tell you about her. When I was young my mom loved me. But then money became an issue. My mom started to do tricks to bring money in. Me and my younger brother would sit in this house and my mom would expose us to X-rated

movies. So by the time I was five years old I knew everything a teenager would know about the Birds and the Bees. My mom would be so drugged out that nothing was important to her. No food, no clothes, no power and most of all no water. She cared so much more about her own damn self that her kids were nothing. My mom would beat me with a switch and leave marks on my back and legs. I hate my mom the only thing I want to ask her is why she gave me so much heartache at such a young age. (Alicia)

I mean I knew she did drugs and all that but I didn't care. When me and my sister used to play house we used to act like we were drunk and smoking. It's sad to think how such an innocent game was turned so nasty based on our experience. It's sad that one reason I was taken away is cuz my mom prostituted me at the age of seven which I feel explains a lot. (Kia)

Based on narratives from *FYSH* participants, both fathers and mothers appeared responsible for maltreatment serious enough to require intervention from child protective services. Three participants (including one sibling pair)—all those with an adult male in the home during their childhood—remembered abuse by a father or stepfather as the reason for entering care. (One participant disputed the allegation of her biological father's abuse.) The other seven all came from homes headed by single mothers who, without exception in the context of substance abuse, perpetrated their children's maltreatment. **Despite neglect or abuse of their children, though, and whether or not their contact ended permanently, biological**

mothers remained the single most important personal relationship across *FYSH* participants—remembered in some cases with anger, in some with ambivalence, and in some with forgiveness—but with an impact lasting into late teen years and early adulthood.

My birth mother's name was S [] S []. I don't really know what to think about her. I mean sometimes I'm really angry and hate her but deep down I hurt and love her. As I grew up I told myself I'd never be like her but it turns out I'm just like her. My mom did what she wanted when she wanted how she wanted and so do I. My mom went to jail and so do I. My mom slept around and got AIDS and died. It's a miracle I haven't got it. My mom did drugs and so did I. The comparisons kill me. I want to be better than her. She haunts me. All I wanted is for my mommy to love and accept me. And I always ask God is that too much to ask for. (Kia)

Most people won't understand why I would go see my mom or step dad. Especially after what they did to me and my siblings. The best way I can explain it is that it's not worth holding a grudge against another person. Staying mad, for me, is not something I want to put energy into. I love staying positive and finding positive things in every situation.

Yes, I don't like what happened with my mom and step dad. I don't like, well I guess I should say that I don't agree with the decisions that my mom and step dad made. I'm not going to hold it

against them. I do forgive them but there is no excuse for it. Nothing they say can make it right.

I'm happy I have some kind of relationship with my mom. I do love her. Things weren't always bad. I know that there is an amazing person in her...waiting to come out. (Amanda)

Not only mothers, but other family members too—siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents—remained important to *FYSH* participants throughout their involvement in the child welfare system. These blood relationships remained emotionally tenacious despite physical separation, and very important in the narratives of *FYSH* participants.

S [] – she's my sister and besides my mother she's one of the sweetest people I know. She has hurt me in some ways but she has helped me out in so many ways. She's always there for me. When I feel like I have no one she's there. I call her my heart and that she is. She took me under her wing. (Deanna)

The good I see in all the bad is that in a way it kept my brothers and I really close. We were the only family we had left after a while. We needed each other. (Amanda)

My uncle. First to put a basketball in my hands. I thank him. (Deanna)

We lived with our Grandma for two weeks. Then moved in with our Aunt and Uncle. I loved it there. We were able to be kids without fear. They treated us as if we were their kids.

My Grandma S [] is amazing. She was one of the most generous people I knew. She opened her home to anyone who needed it. I loved going to her house. We had toys there that we left there that were "Grandma's house toys." We weren't allowed to take them home. That was okay though. My family (bio family) always went to my Grandma's house for family get togethers. She loved being a mom and a Grandma. She was great at both.

We were pretty close. I trusted her and knew she was always there for me if I needed her. My Grandma was always kind to me, always encouraging. I can't even express fully how much she meant to me. She even did things like taking me to see my mom when I wasn't supposed to. Someone found out and that's why I wasn't allowed to see my Grandmother until I turned 18.

My mom says she sees a lot of my Grandma in me. I wish I could have told her how much I loved her. She passed away June 25th 2005. Exactly one month after I turned 18. It was really sad. I really miss her...a lot.

At least I still have my grandpa. (Amanda)

Findings:

Life in Care

In the beginning it was all good. I was living with my sister's grandma, then with my Aunt T [], then with a woman named T [], then back with my Aunt T [], then with my sister on my dad's side. Coming into foster care I thought that things would change but they really didn't, they got worse. I moved from like six different homes and that made things hard. I was away from my sister and my brother, I [saw] them from time to time. It was then that I realized that everything that my mom had done and said wasn't to hurt us, it was to prepare us for the real world. Then I didn't see but now I see that my mom did nothing wrong, she was simply doing her job. Foster care definitely isn't what I thought it would be, it's a mess. I had my best friend R [] to talk to about everything though so having her to talk to really made things better. But I mean waking up every morning without your mom isn't the easiest thing to deal with. My mom always told me "it don't get no better than your mama." That is so true because your foster parents or cousin, grandma, sister, whatever...can give you 20 pairs of Jordans and give you 100 dollars a day but they can never replace your mother. Once you get into the system it's hard to get out. I'll tell you that. (Melanie)

Even though entry into foster care made them safer, most *FYSH* participants interpreted this experience as negative. For some, like Melanie, foster care was an

unnecessary intrusion into the integrity of her family, disruptive and unstable. Aaron's brief memory of eighth grade graduation illustrates the insignificance that foster children can sometimes feel. Taya's narrative actually describes her foster homes as deliberately cruel, humiliating places.

Something negative from my mapping is 8th grade graduation – yea basically no one came some random fucks cheered for me, whooo!! I guess it is good cuz it showed me what being on your own can feel like. If I could go back I would not have gone. (Aaron)

The earliest memory I have is of these two big guys coming in to get me from my aunt's (who I thought was my mom for a long time) house. They arrested my brother but back then I didn't know what to think of the experience. I was put into my first foster home. All I remember there was a boy who made me drink out of a coke can full of pee. I also got the chicken pox there. Then I moved to Ms. W []'s house at the age of four. The school would not let me into kindergarten because it was too late. In third grade I had to move again. This time to a white family in Rantoul. Their names were the H []'s. They were terribly abusive to me. They used to curse at me and call me out of my name. They would splash water in my face and mistreat me. (Taya)

In comparison to their peers, foster youth and young adults who have lived in substitute care experience severe obstacles in the transition to independence—lower levels of educational attainment, employment, and income, along with high rates of

early parenthood and justice system involvement. **While factors other than or coincidental to foster care also played some role, *FYSH* narratives were consistent with other observations of elevated risk behavior among foster youth.**

My mom died February 26 2001 [while Kia was in foster care]. It broke my heart. I never felt so much pain. I wanted to die. I tried to kill myself. I tried. I couldn't imagine my life without her. But when she died I freaked out. I became so violent and out of control. I slept around looking for consolation. I picked fights with everybody. I got arrested over 44 times. I been to JDC for an extended period six times and DOC twice. My rap sheet is four pages long and I'm only 17. I have 18 aggravated batteries. I couldn't handle her death. I was only 10 when she died. Only 10 and I started going to jail and doing all that shit. (Kia)

If I could change anything in my life I would change from the summer after my ninth grade year till now! I started to hang out on the streets. My ninth grade year I got all A's and B's with one C. I got used to running the streets. I started to smoke and drink. It seemed like summer ended too soon. I wasn't ready to go back. I used to be scared to get into trouble at school but something changed in me! But I would change that because I messed up. (Carly)

FYSH narratives make it clear that given a choice, participants would not have entered the child welfare system. **Once there, though, some of them found**

positive aspects in the experience. Some workshop participants expressed appreciation for specific people, and especially for supportive foster parents. Others found useful life lessons through their experiences in care.

I was born July 16, 1991 and I'm 16 years old. I currently just got out of foster care. I could say I've had it easy compared to what most foster children have been through. I was lucky enough to have a foster parent who cared. Well at least she acted like she did if she didn't. Sometimes I wish I lived back with her. My mother and I always don't see eye to eye so we argue a lot. And when I was staying with my former foster mother I didn't have to worry about that at all. But it's nice to know that I'll always have her to call on if I need to. If I needed to talk I know she'll always be there. I wish I could tell her how much I appreciate her. She never judged me, blamed me, or faulted me. I thank her for everything she's done for me. If I could repay her I would. (Ginny)

When I was in foster care I was always comfortable with the people who took me places and I was put in environments around people that were there for me if I had not I think I would honestly end up very unhappy, confused and angry knowing I could have had so much more. (Aaron)

I see going to boot camp as a good experience. Now that I look back and see all that happened. I lived in a group home there and

*learned to deal with all kind of kids with all kinds of problems who
went to school there. (Aaron)*

Findings:

Leaving Care and Beyond

I am really angry now at my adoptive Mom. How could she treat me like garbage and then get the praise for raising me? I did it! I made all of my accomplishments happen. NO ONE Did It But Me. R []'s been angry at me when I feel she has no right to be. I don't think it is very fair that she gets angry at me for stuff because I buy all of my own clothes and supplies and I rarely ask to go anywhere or do anything and most of all I pay for living there. I have been so nice to these women and all I ever get back is crap. I AM SO ANGRY. R [] called me a name last night because I bought HER son some things at Wal-Mart. I am not stupid. I am not spending all of my money. I know how to budget my finances. I need to find an apartment by myself where I can think so no one will try to run my life. I just want to be free from this bondage and emptiness I feel inside. Maybe it's just the time of year to feel yucky. Maybe not. If I could have one wish I would wish the thing I wished for a long time ago. A Mom, a Dad, and a dog. What will my kids think when I tell them they don't have a Grandma or a Granddad? It will hurt me too badly. Hope has done nothing for me parent wise. I just want someone to love me and I, them. (Taya)

FYSH participants came into foster care from ages almost too early to remember—like Taya (who long thought her aunt was her biological mother)—through their teen years—like Ginny. During their involvement in the workshops,

four remained in care. One had “aged out” and one reunified with her biological mother while a *FYSH* participant. **Among *FYSH* narratives, what stood out were the profoundly unhappy post-adoptive experiences of the four *FYSH* participants who left foster care through adoption.**

My mother is a vindictive person. She tries to sabotage me. She tells me things like “you won’t go to college,” “you can’t teach,” and “you’re a failure.” She is mean but I think she is mean because she is hurting. I think that my Mom has bipolar disorder. She goes through terrible mood swings and she lies and doesn’t remember what she says or maybe she does but chooses to lie about it. She hurt me by telling me I was disabled all the time and bringing my self esteem down the tubes with the insults she threw at me constantly everyday. One thing that I would want her to know is that I can survive without her. I have found my strength and I can go on with my life and not include her. (Taya)

E [] [Amanda’s adoptive mother] was very emotionally abusive. She liked to play mind games and manipulate you into thinking you were horrible. It sucked. Even though she knew she was going to adopt us she would refer to R [] and I as the “foster children.” Instead of introducing us by our first names. Making us feel unimportant. She had a way of twisting things around just to make you look stupid or wrong. She would also favor her children over R [] or I. (Amanda)

Three participants in the *FYSH* workshops (Amanda, Carly, and Alicia) left their adoptive homes, due to tension with adoptive parents, before they turned 18. Ginny's foster care case closed during her participation in the *FYSH* workshops, when she was 17, and she returned to the custody of her biological mother. Approaching adulthood, Carly and Ginny wrote narratives that reflected both anxiety and hope in relationships with their (adoptive, for Carly and biological, for Ginny) parents.

The person I'm going to write about is my mom. Her name is T [] B [] and the only thing we share is our last name. Don't get me wrong we do have our ups and downs! We could never live together for the simple fact that we don't get along under the same roof. But for some reason the space/distance between us brings us closer. We can talk on the phone for hours! She has influenced my life in so many ways! She taught me just about everything I know. She helped me catch up academically. I thank her for that! She helped me think about my future. My mom is my role model as for almost everything. She's my role model for relationships her and my Dad have been married for 20 years this July. She's my role model for staying in school. But she is not my role model for the way she disciplines her kids. But anyway my mom has let me down pretty much like everybody else. She sent me away! The only difference is we kept in touch except it's more like I kept in touch. Luckily she hasn't changed

her number over the past six years! But I don't know if I really want to do that anymore because it's 50/50 not anything less. (Carly)

Court...that's finally over. Back home again. It's official (well kinda). I hope everything goes okay. I'm still kinda in between. But I can't have both. Me and my mom are doing OK, I guess. Sometimes I wonder if she doesn't want me to have any fun. A couple of times she acted like I don't know how to take care of my son. She tries to take over like he's her child sometimes. I don't like that but I don't say anything because I don't want us to start arguing. (Ginny)

Findings:

The Personal Meaning of Foster Care

What I really want to say is...

Thank you

I love you

I love myself unconditionally

[College] here I come.

I love life.

I am special.

I am cute.

Live, love, laugh, and be happy. (Deanna)

I am basically a fun person. When I say that I am a fun person I mean that I just live life like there's no tomorrow, I love to crack jokes and make people laugh. (Melanie)

My pride, my character, my hard work, my determination, where will it all lead me? My character is beautiful. My mind is beautiful. My thoughts are beautiful. My smile is beautiful. So basically I'm beautiful. (Deanna)

Often child welfare professionals—researchers, decision makers, providers—understand child welfare and foster care through lenses of data, policy, program design and implementation. The young people who joined the *FYSH* workshops see

foster care in much more personal terms. Narratives that emerged most spontaneously throughout the sessions concentrated on the effects of life in care on their sense of self and personal meaning.

Many personal narratives were characterized by an attitude of resilience.

They acknowledge the pain of experiences within the child welfare system, but at the same time credit these as factors building character and a knowledgeable integrity of self. Commonly, these *FYSH* narratives cite the negative opinions of other people about youth in foster care as stimulating the motivation to excel and prove these people wrong. Other narratives disclose how their foster care experience made the *FYSH* participants more compassionate themselves.

Sometimes the worst things bring the BEST things along with them. I try to make the most of all that comes and the least of all that goes. Proud graduate shall find her way to rally June 30th!! (Deanna)

Other people are my inspiration. I am a people person. I like to meet new people. Whether it's my cousin or a person who doesn't like me people are my inspiration. People say things to me that keeps me going, they inspire me like a person might try to put me down but really it doesn't faze me because I like to flip things on people instead of them making me feel bad I end up proving them wrong and that's just how I am. (Melanie)

I can't wait until my big day comes when I walk across that stage and get my high school diploma. I wonder if I'll cry, hearing all those people cheering for me. I can't wait to see the faces on the people who told me I couldn't make it. They're giving me more strength just to finish that much faster. (Ginny)

I love kids, and want to help them. If I had all the money in the world and the biggest house I would take all the beaten, abused, sexual molested even the children with disabilities into my home. I guess I could be a foster parent but in my heart I wish I was into a million pieces every lost, depressed, and even a child with no mom and dad would at least have me as a friend, mom, mentor, whatever they want to call me there for them. I wish I could take all the tears from all the left behind children and make a rainbow of colors for them to laugh and smile. (Alicia)

Other narratives expressed a bleaker view of self and the world, especially characterized by regret over the past and a fundamental lack of trust in other people. Based on existing data, we can not know whether time in foster care alone directly caused these feelings. It is obvious, though, in the words of *FYSH* participants' narratives, that they are strongly felt.

I just wish that I could change my past. I wish that I could have chosen the life for me. I would have never did what my mom did

*to me. I would have chosen a family that could have loved me for me.
But I guess wishes in my world don't come true. (Alicia)*

*The world is basically fake. I mean the world is just fake to me
because the people in it are fake. You might find a couple of people
who are real but people just don't know what the word real means.
(Melanie)*

*I don't trust nobody. They lie and cheat and do whatever and
say whatever to get what they want. Yea. I don't trust shit til it
happens. No matter who tells me. You say you'll do it and if you do
great. If not I don't expect you to so I'm fine. (Kia)*

*How do people go around and think they are better than you.
You care about people but they want to roll you up in a ball and throw
you away. I open up to everyone and only thing I get in return is
bullshit. They tell you yeah I will be here for you. I promise I will not
hurt you and look what happens five minutes later they stomp on you.
You tell them everything they want to know and they tell you they
want to be with you then turn around and tell you to fuck off that is
not caring about someone that is just tearing their emotions, heart
and soul out the window for someone else to pick up and to fix on the
way to the next day. (Alicia)*

Achievements, Limitations, and the Future of *FYSH* Research

During FY 2008, the Center piloted a new approach to Project *FYSH* that would align it more closely with overall research goals. These efforts produced clear improvements in the methodological rigor of the program and the substance of its findings. At the same time, changes to the project helped clarify further improvements that can make findings from Project *FYSH* even more helpful to the Department in its service to foster children and youth. Implementing these changes will be a priority for our work in FY 2009.

Achievements. The FY 2008 *FYSH* program contributed to the Center's qualitative studies work in several important ways.

Prior to FY 2008, *FYSH* served primarily as a service project, employing a small group of foster youth as "writing specialists" for the Center. The value of their contribution to our understanding of life in care is not in doubt. But in FY 2008, we extended this work significantly, recruiting a more diverse group of participants from across the community, for a more comprehensive picture of life in care from the perspective of those who have experienced it. In addition, this year the Center established and maintained productive working relationships with a number of agencies within and beyond Champaign County. These connections will make it possible to extend qualitative work with an even more representative group of foster children, youth, caregivers, and professionals throughout the state in coming years.

Methodological improvements in FY 2008 enhanced the quality of *FYSH* data. By restructuring the program into a series of finite workshops, we reduced participant attrition to zero—not a single participant, throughout the entire year, dropped out of the program. In addition, every *FYSH* participant completed each

workshop session. The introduction of a multimedia component dramatically increased the quantity and quality of narrative data produced during Project *FYSH*. Use of video taped narrative during the fifth workshop session promoted access to expression among participants less inclined to feel comfortable with writing, and the informality of the medium facilitated productive interaction among workshop participants. Audio taping of workshop sessions and follow up interviews dramatically increased the quantity of narrative data in comparison to that we could obtain through written texts alone. Finally, the introduction of follow up interviews allowed us to gain deeper understanding of topics brought up by individual participants during workshop sessions.

Finally and most significantly, the focus of this year's *FYSH* investigation moved significantly closer to address priorities identified by the Department as it seeks to define the future of child welfare and foster care in Illinois. In particular, *FYSH* methodology this year has concentrated on the conditions that make families vulnerable to child maltreatment, the subjective personal experiences of children and youth throughout their encounters with the child welfare system, and the ongoing consequences—often lingering for years—of removal from the family of origin and placement in substitute care.

Limitations. Overall, Project *FYSH* enjoyed a very productive year in FY 2008. At the same time, it also experienced a few disappointing outcomes which the Center expects to address in FY 2009.

Despite extensive outreach, the recruitment of a broader population of *FYSH* participants, and establishment of stronger working ties with community agencies, we enrolled a smaller-than-expected total number of foster youth and young adults and could fill only three complete workshops. (Once enrolled, though, participants

remained with the program, and we think this means that the actual conduct of *FYSH* is truly engaging the population we need to hear from.) This may have happened because Champaign County only offers a limited pool of potential *FYSH* recruits—in absolute numbers as well as the proportion of the county’s older foster youth and former foster youth willing to share their recollections and to do this in writing. While the involvement of case workers for recruitment helped us identify youth most likely to benefit from *FYSH*, the pressures of their own professional lives could have limited their capacity to engage in *FYSH* recruitment. To better manage potential recruitment issues, the Center’s qualitative research staff expects to consult with this year’s *FYSH* participants, as well as agency leadership and staff, when beginning to plan research design for FY 2009, and to use their information to fine-tune (or substantially revise) our recruitment effort.

While a more diverse group of young people joined *FYSH* in FY 2008, we remain concerned about the voices not yet represented in existing *FYSH* data. From quantitative data we know that Illinois’ foster care population profiles differently across various regions of the state. It’s reasonable to expect that subjective experiences of care in different regions might vary as well. For this reason, it will enhance the quality of our qualitative results to extend *FYSH* beyond Champaign County alone, focusing especially on the Chicago region and in the state’s rural south. We need to generate qualitative data from young people experiencing the most severe problems during or following their time in foster care. Without their stories, we can not develop the subjective understanding of their unique circumstances and perspectives. To attract these young people may require targeted recruitment and some alteration of a program structure that currently expects participants to take considerable personal responsibility for their involvement and

may not work so well with hard-to-reach youth. Based on feedback from current *FYSH* participants, we also should consider the involvement of younger foster children in our qualitative studies effort. This too, will require recruitment strategies and a research design—including human subjects protection—specific to this younger pool of potential *FYSH* participants. Finally, the collection of qualitative data from other key informants involved with foster children in youth—including but not limited to their biological, foster, or adoptive families as well as those who serve these young people in child welfare, education, or other social systems could create a more rounded understanding of foster care experience from the multiple perspectives it intersects.

The future of *FYSH* research. In FY 2008, the Center's *FYSH* research added a significant amount of information to its qualitative data archive on child welfare and foster care in Illinois. Priorities for qualitative studies in FY 2009 will emphasize their coordination with the Department's vision for the future of child welfare in the state and the Center's existing quantitative results. Given recruiting difficulties in FY 2008 and the need for qualitative information about foster care experience outside east central Illinois, in the coming year we expect to pilot outreach to potential participants in other parts of the state. We also anticipate a broader range of research participants, prioritizing data from youth and young adults who experience more severe problems, wards younger than 16, and other informants whose experience intersects with focal foster youth and young adults.

Conclusion:

Implications for Practice and Research

I hate to hear about how crappy the system is. I think our government is so jacked up. What I'd really like to see is our president foster some children...and other government officials. Why not? They have the money...and I'm sure they have the space. What's holding them back? Do they feel that they are too good for that?

...Amanda, 20 years old

Historically, most of what we know about children's experience in foster care comes from quantitative data, especially large administrative data sets and survey results. In some ways, the qualitative findings from Project *FYSH* confirmed existing understandings—about family stresses such as substance abuse that result in children's removal from home, about the turmoil children feel when moving from placement to placement while in care, and of the troubles, like justice system involvement and early parenting, disproportionately faced by young adults who have spent time in the child welfare system.

But as the Department attempts to move forward into areas beyond child safety, where few concrete policies or models yet exist, FY 2008 findings from Project *FYSH* suggest a number of implications for practice that qualitative and mixed methods study can productively inform.

A first group of *FYSH* conclusions described family circumstances that called for participants' entry into foster care, and how these events happened. They

underscored the real value of the child welfare system for the children who suffer when their families are in distress. But *FYSH* narratives also made it clear that even after living in care, foster children and youth remain emotionally attached to their original families and especially, to their birth mothers.

Almost certainly, foster care will always be necessary, but a central implication of these findings recommends that interventions to reduce family risk factors and perhaps more significantly, to reinforce family strengths, might minimize the need for substitute care. Some interventions—fatherhood initiatives for example—might focus inside the family. Other efforts to support families might deal with external issues such as a family’s situation of poverty or economic insecurity, creating pressures that can predict child maltreatment.

Second, a set of *FYSH* narratives focused on the experiences of participants while in the care of the child welfare system. These consistently emphasized the emotional turmoil of life in foster care. Yet, other narratives that gave credit to foster care suggest when foster families have the capacity to parent effectively, foster children surely can grow in positive ways across crucial domains of well being such as education, physical and emotional health.

As one implication, these findings might mean that innovative strategies like differential response might provide families with constructive supports to protect children while keeping them in the home. For children in care, the *FYSH* findings also imply that supports should take place to minimize the constantly contingent nature of their lives in the system. These interventions might focus on the foster family, building its capacity to parent its foster child(ren) but should strengthen healthy development in foster children as well.

In a third theme, the *FYSH* workshops explored life after foster care, among this year's participants largely through adoption. Perhaps surprising, these narratives describe extremely unhappy adoption outcomes. Similarly, one *FYSH* participant who reunified with her mother expressed considerable ambivalence and even some desire to return to her foster family.

Intuitively, adoption and reunification would seem like happy events. So these results might appear paradoxical. In this case, qualitative research is especially well-suited to help decode the surely complex array of issues involved in placement disruption, and might recommend policies and actions to assist adoptive families as well as those who have reunified.

Finally, a fourth cluster of findings dealt with the personal identities, values and beliefs of the participants in Project *FYSH*. An encouraging share of these narratives expressed positive self-regard, compassion for other people, an appetite for living, and an optimistic take on the future. But a few other narratives reflected lingering anger, grief, and despair which their authors linked to time in foster care.

Older youth constitute a larger proportion of Illinois' foster care population than in the past. Implications of these findings are compelling, for youth in care who can reasonably expect to achieve permanence through emancipation from the system. We don't know how to explain why some young people, having lived in foster care, go on to thrive as adults while others continue under the burden of this experience long after they leave the system. Focused qualitative work has significant potential to extend understanding on this question, contributing to practice innovations that might better prepare older foster youth to move successfully into adulthood.

To the potential parents make sure that your kid is loved and protected. Be polite to them and treat all your kids equally. Make sure that they know about you're their heritage as well as yours. Be sure to clothe and feed and house your children. And last but not least love your child unconditionally, no matter what the child does, goes through, or rebels against. Love is the most important key to happiness with your child. Make sure you give them faith and religion but don't force it upon them as they will not receive it in this manner. If you can become your child's mentor do so. If there is anything you can do to save your child from destructive decisions you are encouraged to do so. If that means going to the movies or spending more time with your child. Provide for the child and allow the child to mess up but teach them a better way. Don't disable your child by telling them things they cannot do. Instead encourage them to do things and to think outside the box. Also encourage your child to try new things even when it doesn't seem good to you. Who knows maybe your child will like it. That is what I would want to instill in you all. Thanks for your time.

...Taya, 20 years old

APPENDICES

Foster Youth Seen and Heard

(Project FYSH)

**Workshop Manual
2007–2008**

Workshop Session One

Agenda

Welcome

Why Project FYSH?

Research on foster children and youth

Research and personal life writing

Review of FYSH Guidelines and Information

Timed Writing

Life Mapping

Group Check and Session Close

Group Guidelines

We want to make the most of our time together, and to make sure that everyone here feels completely respected during their participation in the FYSH workshop. From past experience, we have found that a few simple guidelines help a lot to make sure these goals happen.

Using our time well

- Sessions begin and end on time.
- Cell phones stay off throughout the session.
- Beverages in session are fine, but no food during our meetings.

Respecting each participant

- Always be honest.
- Feel free to say what you want (and as much as you want), but also consider that others want to speak too.
- If someone is talking, let that person finish before interrupting.
- Keep an open and non-judgmental mind about others' feelings and beliefs.
- Disagreement is fine, but personal attacks are not.
- Participate fully, so all can benefit from what you have to say.

Remember to respect the confidentiality of our communication during sessions.

Feel free to raise questions or concerns at any time, inside or outside the sessions.

Information

All of us at the Children and Family Research Center are committed to helping you enjoy your experience during the workshop. We encourage you to ask questions at any time.

Dayna Finet will be running the workshop and keeping the whole FYSH project on track. You should feel free to contact Dayna at any time, either by phone (217.265.0192) or by email (dfinet@uiuc.edu) . You also can contact Tamara Fuller, the associate director of the Children and Family Research Center, with your questions. Tami's telephone number is 217.244.8615 and her email address is t-fuller@uiuc.edu.

Our prior work with foster children and youth makes us feel confident that you will enjoy the FYSH workshop and find it very rewarding. But some of the topics that come up can be sensitive and possibly even upsetting. If you are uncomfortable with anything that comes up during the workshop and can't reach Dayna or Tami, here are some additional resources that may help:

For immediate assistance

- Champaign County Mental Health Center Crisis Line
217.359.4141
- First Call for Help
217.352.6300

For additional resources and longer term assistance

- Champaign County Community Resource Guide
http://www.helpsource.org/Community_Resource_Guide_2007.pdf
- United Way of Champaign County
217.352.5151

Timed Writing

You can think of this exercise as a warm up, and we'll repeat it every session.

For the next five minutes, write down whatever comes to mind, and write as fast as you can. (You might call this a "brain dump.") No right or wrong. No censorship of your thoughts. It doesn't matter what you write about, as long as you write spontaneously. Your workshop leader will let you know when the time is up. Then we'll have a chance for anyone who wants to read what they wrote to share it with the group.

Life Mapping

This map of your life will help you remember events, people, places, and things that have been important in your life so far. It's a sort of graphic outline of what stands out in your life, and we'll come back to it during the next sessions of the FYSH workshop.

To make your life map today, you won't need to write too much (that comes later). On the next few pages, you'll be filling in the tables to help you organize your most significant experiences.

To start, look over the life map pages. You'll see that the three columns to the left (on each page) help you organize your life map chronologically—both the years that you remember and your age at those times. Then you'll see that the (wide) middle column of each page focuses on an important aspect of your life—events that happened, people in your life, places you remember, and things that mattered to you. The column to the far right of each page asks you to write down how you felt (then) or how you feel (now) about those events, people, and things.

You probably won't have something to write down in every single cell of these tables and that's fine. Just write what seems important to your life.

You'll probably get the hang of it right away, but we'll check in with everyone as you work, to answer any of your questions. Good luck!

Life Mapping

YEARS	YOUR AGE	EVENTS YOU REMEMBER	YOUR FEELINGS
1980–1985			
1986–1990			
1991–1995			
1996–2000			
2001–2005			
2006–2007			

Life Mapping

YEARS	YOUR AGE	PEOPLE YOU REMEMBER	YOUR FEELINGS
1980–1985			
1986–1990			
1991–1995			
1996–2000			
2001–2005			
2006–2007			

Life Mapping

YEARS	YOUR AGE	PLACES YOU REMEMBER	YOUR FEELINGS
1980–1985			
1986–1990			
1991–1995			
1996–2000			
2001–2005			
2006–2007			

Life Mapping

YEARS	YOUR AGE	THINGS YOU REMEMBER	YOUR FEELINGS
1980–1985			
1986–1990			
1991–1995			
1996–2000			
2001–2005			
2006–2007			

Workshop Session Two

Agenda

Session One Review

Timed Writing

Writing Exercise One
How You Came to Foster Care

Writing Exercise Two
Biographies From Your Life

Group Check and Session Close

Timed Writing

You'll remember this exercise from last week, and we'll repeat it in the rest of our sessions together too.

For the next five minutes, write down whatever comes to mind, and write as fast as you can. (You might call this a "brain dump.") No right or wrong. No censorship of your thoughts. It doesn't matter what you write about, as long as you write spontaneously. Your workshop leader will let you know when the time is up. Then we'll have a chance for anyone who wants to read what they wrote to share it with the group.

Writing Exercise One **How You Came to Foster Care**

Write as much as you can remember about first coming into foster care. What you write doesn't need to be in any special order, so you should feel free to start at the beginning and go to the end, or skip around as you describe your memories.

Writing Exercise Two **Biographies From Your Life**

From the list of people on your life map, pick those who are part of your family of origin.

Write about each of these people and the role they have played in your life, focusing on these three elements:

- A description of the person, mostly the kind of person they were/are;
- What they did that hurt or helped you;
- What you'd like them to know about you now.

Workshop Session Three

Agenda

Session Two Review

Timed Writing

Writing Exercise Three
Your History:
How It Was and How You Would Change It

Writing Exercise Four
Your Values and Beliefs

Group Check and Session Close

Timed Writing

You know how this works.

For the next five minutes, write down whatever comes to mind, and write as fast as you can. (You might call this a “brain dump.”) No right or wrong. No censorship of your thoughts. It doesn’t matter what you write about, as long as you write spontaneously. Your workshop leaders will let you know when the time is up. Then we’ll have a chance for anyone who wants to read what they wrote to share it with the group.

Writing Exercise Three

Your History: How It Was and How You Would Change It

From the events you wrote down in your life map, choose two.

One should be an event that was not very happy, and may even have been very difficult or painful for you. The other should be an event that you consider a positive, possibly even very good, experience.

Write about each of these events:

- Describing what actually happened and how it affected you;
- Good things you now see in the bad event, and negative parts of the positive one;
- If you go back in time, how you might change either or both events.

Writing Exercise Four

Your Values and Beliefs

Complete these sentences.

“I am basically _____.”

“Other people are basically _____.”

“The world is basically _____.”

For each statement, write an explanation how you think your experience in foster care led to your beliefs.

Workshop Session Four

Agenda

Session Three Review

Timed Writing

**Writing Exercise Five
Charting Your Life**

**Writing Exercise Six
If You Were a Foster Parent**

Group Check and Session Close

Timed Writing

Timed writing again....

For the next five minutes, write down whatever comes to mind, and write as fast as you can. (You might call this a “brain dump.”) No right or wrong. No censorship of your thoughts. It doesn’t matter what you write about, as long as you write spontaneously. Your workshop leader will let you know when the time is up. Then we’ll have a chance for anyone who wants to read what they wrote to share it with the group.

Writing Exercise Five **Charting Your Life**

On the next two page you’ll see two circles, which you’re going to turn into two pie charts, each with six sections:

- Working
- Learning
- Relationships
- Recreation
- Spirituality
- Wasted Time

In the first circle (the next page), draw how much of the pie you *currently* give to each of the six sections.

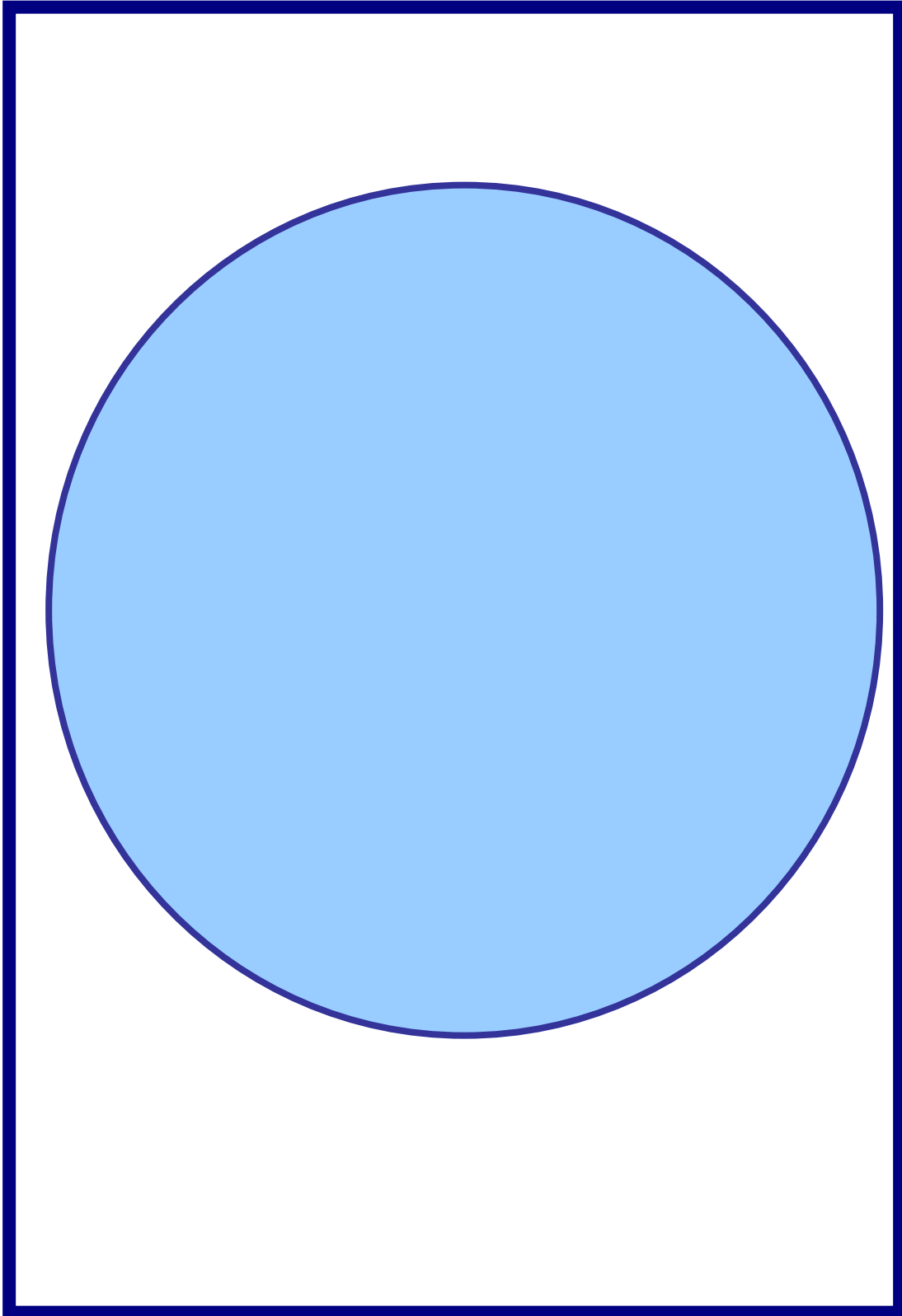
In the second circle (the page after), draw how much of the pie you would *ideally* give to each of the six sections.

Then, for the writing part of this exercise, describe each pie in words—why do your pies look like they do? How has your experience in foster care affected the way you sectioned these pies, and will it help you or hurt you in changing the proportions from your current to your ideal pie?

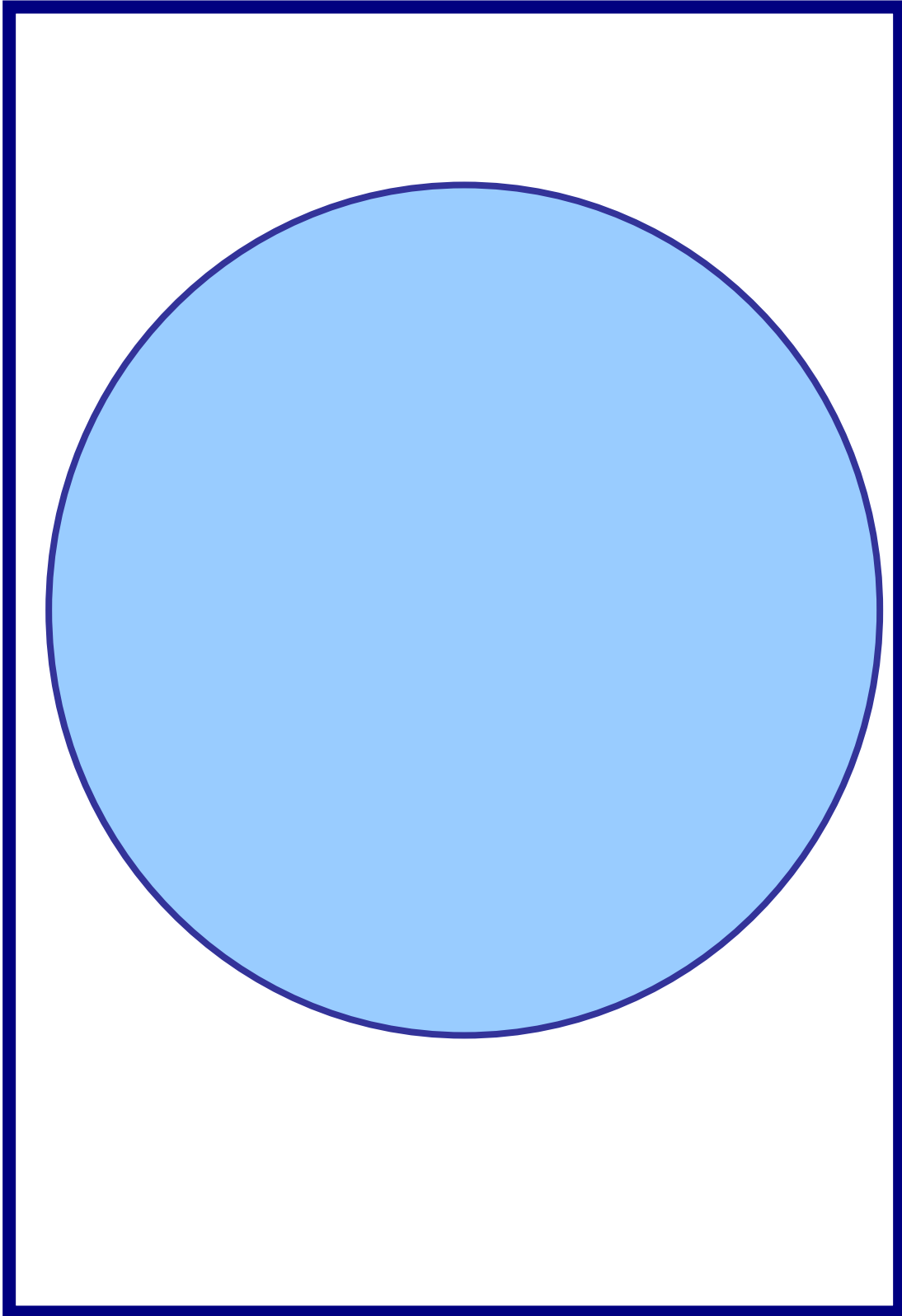
Writing Exercise Six **If You Were a Foster Parent**

Imagine that you are applying to become a foster parent. Write a recommendation letter for yourself, describing your experiences and how they would influence your actions and beliefs as a foster parent.

Charting Your Life



Charting Your Life



Workshop Session Five

Agenda

What's Different This Week?

Timed Writing

**Interviewing Yourself
On (Audio) Tape**

Break

**Your Own Stories
On (Video) Tape**

Sharing Stories and Wrapping Up

Timed Writing

By now, you definitely know what to expect.

For the next five minutes, use the paper in your binder to write down whatever comes to mind, and write as fast as you can. (You might call this a “brain dump.”) No right or wrong. No censorship of your thoughts. It doesn’t matter what you write about, as long as you write spontaneously. Your workshop leaders will let you know when the time is up. Then we’ll have a chance for anyone who wants to read what they wrote to share it with the group.

Interviewing Yourself On (Audio) Tape

To start this exercise, each of you will randomly be given the names of two of your fellow workshop participants. Think of three questions you would like to ask each one of these people—not necessarily the same questions for each, since your questions should be based on the individuals you’ve come to know personally during our five weeks together.

Using the digital recorders, each of you will then get to interview each of the people you’ve written questions for.

Your Own Stories On (Video) Tape

In this exercise, you’ll be writing a one page script on the theme “What I Really Want to Say...” about foster care. To help you think about your script, you can look back at any of the writing you’ve done throughout the workshop, or you can write something completely new. But it only needs to be one page long!

Once everyone has a draft of their script, you each will have a chance to read it aloud and get feedback from the group. There will be time to revise, and then, we’ll videotape your performance!

PROJECT FYSH: YOUTH INTERVIEW

ID: Gender: Race: Age:
Education: Employment:

SECTION 1: FOSTER CARE EXPERIENCES AND THE MEANING OF TIME IN CARE (ASK OF ALL YOUTH)

1. When did you first enter foster care, and what were the circumstances that led to your placement?
2. What foster care placements have you experienced? (Probe: number of placements, age at placement, length of stay, relative or traditional foster care).
3. Overall, how would you describe your experiences of being in foster care? What were some of the most positive and negative things about being in foster care?
4. Having been in foster care, what life experiences and advice would you like to communicate to: a) people who work for DCFS, b) people who are studying to become DCFS case workers, c) younger children in foster care, and d) people in general?

SECTION 2: FAMILY EXPERIENCES (ASK OF ALL YOUTH)

We noticed that family was an important theme discussed by some FYSH writers, and would like to learn more about your family.

1. Who do you currently live with?
2. Who do you consider to be members of your current family? (Clarify the nature of the relationship, e.g., biological, foster, fictive kin).
4. Who do you feel closest to?
5. How would you describe your relationships with your biological siblings? (Probes: To what extent have you wanted to maintain these relationships? What have been some of the challenges to maintaining these relationships? What has been most helpful to you in maintaining these relationships?)
6. How would you describe your relationships with your foster and/or adoptive siblings? (Probes: To what extent have you wanted to maintain these relationships? What have been some of the challenges to maintaining these relationships? What has been most helpful to you in maintaining these relationships?)
7. How would you describe your relationships with your biological parents? (Probes: To what extent have you wanted to maintain these relationships? What have been some of the challenges to maintaining relationships with your siblings? What has been most helpful to you in maintaining these relationships?)
8. How would you describe your relationships with your foster parents? (Probes: To what extent have you wanted to maintain these relationships? What have been some of the challenges to maintaining relationships with your siblings? What has been most helpful to you in maintaining these relationships?)
9. Who would you like to call family 5 years from now?

SECTION 3: ADOPTION/GUARDIANSHIP/PERMANENCY (ASK OF YOUTH WHO WERE ADOPTED OR PLACED IN LEGAL GUARDIANSHIP)

We notice that some FYSH writers have discussed becoming adopted or getting a permanent legal guardian and would like to learn about your thoughts and experiences.

1. How do (did) you feel about becoming adopted (getting a legal guardian)?
2. What were (do you think will be) some of the major benefits?
3. What were (do you think will be) some of the major challenges?
4. What services did (will) you receive during the process of getting adopted (getting a legal guardian)? (Probes: How helpful were they? How could they be improved?)

SECTION 4: TRANSITIONING TO INDEPENDENT LIVING (ASK OF YOUTH AGED 17 YEARS AND ABOVE)

We notice that some FYSH writers have discussed transitioning to independent living, and would like to learn about your thoughts and experiences.

1. How do (did) you feel about transitioning to independent living?
2. What were (do you think will be) some of the major benefits?
3. What were (do you think will be) some of the major challenges?
4. What services did (will) you receive? (Probes: How helpful were they? How could they be improved?)

SECTION 5: PARENTING (ASK OF YOUTH WHO ARE PARENTS)

We noticed that children and parenting have been key themes of past FYSH writings and would like the opportunity to learn more about your experiences.

1. How would you describe your experience of being a parent so far? (Probe: how old were you when your first child was born? What are the ages of your children?)
2. Were you involved with DCFS at the time of your pregnancy or child's birth? What has been your involvement with DCFS as a parent, if any?
3. To what extent has your experience (past and/or present) in the system helped you or your children? (Possible probes: for example, resources from IDCFS pregnant and/or parenting program.)
4. To what extent has being in the system (in the past and/or the present) hurt you or your children? (Possible probes: for example, some young parents report that having been in foster care themselves that they fear that their children will be taken, or they feel humiliation at probes into their personal lives by caseworkers).
5. How would you say that your experience as a young parent compares with that of other young parents?
6. What would you say is the status of adolescent parents within your (e.g., African American) community?
7. What would you say is the status of young parents within DCFS?

SECTION 6: SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS ON YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE (ASK OF ALL YOUTH)

We notice that some FYSH writers have discussed the way they felt perceived by others as foster children and youth, and would like to learn about your experiences.

1. To what extent have you shared with friends, teachers, and other adults in your life your status as a foster child? (Probe: as a child, teenager, now? How have you told people? Have you ever tried to hide the fact that you were in care?).
2. How do people act after they learn that you are in or have been in foster care? Can you anticipate how different people will react?
3. To what extent did you feel, growing up, that adults made assumptions about you because you were a foster child? (Probe: teachers, foster parents, peers' parents, coaches, DCFS workers or other adults?) How did you know they felt this way? What did they do?
4. To what extent did you feel, growing up, that other children and youth made assumptions about you because you were a foster child? (Probe: your friends, classmates, other children) How did you know they felt this way? What did they do?
5. To what extent did the label of "foster child" affect you growing up? (Probes: how you felt about yourself or others, the opportunities you had?).
6. How would you say the media generally portray foster children and youth? Can you give an example?
7. What do you think most people, in general, think about children and youth in foster care? How do you feel about this?

SECTION 7: GOALS

We would like to learn more about your goals and dreams for the future.

1. What are your most important short term goals you have for yourself – say, in the next 5 years? (Probe: family, education, career)
2. What are some of your important long-term goals you have for yourself – say, in the next 10-20 years? (Probe: family, education, career)
3. What are your plans to reach these short- and long-term goals?
4. What and who have been some of the major influences on shaping your goals? How did they help you to shape your goals?
5. To what extent have others helped you or hindered you in reaching these goals? (Probe: What other resources and support do you have in reaching these goals? What obstacles do you face?)
6. To what extent have you helped or hindered yourself in reaching these goals?
7. To what extent has DCFS helped or hindered you in reaching your goals? (Probe: What are some things that DCFS can do to help you to reach your goals?)
8. To what extent do you feel motivated to help other foster youth? (Probe: to what extent has your experience of being in foster care contributed to this motivation?) To what extent have you been able to act on this dream?

SECTION 8: EXPERIENCES IN FYSH (ASK OF ALL YOUTH)

1. Tell me about how you came to be involved in Project FYSH. (Probe: What attracted you to join? What were some of your goals?)
2. Tell me about Project FYSH. (Probe: What do you see as the most important components of this program to you and why? Activities, relationships, opportunities.)
3. How could DCFS better support foster youth?

SECTION 9: INDIVIDUAL

We notice that foster youth are a diverse group of people, and would like to learn more about your unique situation.

1. What do you see as unique aspects of your own situation?
2. What would you say have been some of the most difficult challenges that you've had in your life? What helped you through those challenges? What got in your way?
3. Sometimes people who have been in foster care struggle with alcohol or drugs, or have other problems like getting involved with the police or courts. What has been your observation or experience of these problems?
4. What else would you like us to know about you?

Project FYSH: Writing Questionnaire

As you know, writing about and sharing your personal experiences has been a very important part of Project FYSH.

Now that you've completed the workshop, we would like to ask your opinion about your writing and the conversations we've had together.

Each question is pretty much self-explanatory, but please feel free to ask questions about anything that's confusing.

For each question, just place an "X" at the spot on the line that's closest to your opinion—the two ends of the line stand for completely opposite points of view. The example in the box lists the question, and then different ways people might answer it, depending on their opinions.

Sample Question: Overall (all sessions combined), how personal was what you wrote in the FYSH workshop?

(1. Someone whose writing was **very** personal would mark the questionnaire this way):

NOT AT ALL PERSONAL
EXTREMELY PERSONAL

(2. Someone whose writing was **more personal than average** would mark the questionnaire this way):

NOT AT ALL PERSONAL
EXTREMELY PERSONAL

(3. Someone whose writing was **less personal than average** would mark the questionnaire this way):

NOT AT ALL PERSONAL
EXTREMELY PERSONAL

(4. Someone whose writing was **not very** personal would mark the

Section One - Before You Joined FYSH

1.
Before you joined FYSH, how much did you **think** about your experiences in foster care?

ALMOST NOT AT ALL
THE TIME

ALMOST ALL

2.
Before you joined FYSH, how much had you **told other people** about your experiences in foster care?

ALMOST NOTHING

QUITE A LOT

3.
Before you joined FYSH, how much had you **written** about your experiences in foster care?

NOTHING AT ALL

QUITE A LOT

Section Two - During the FYSH Workshops

1.
During your time with FYSH, how much did you **think** about what you wrote and talked about in the workshop?

ALMOST NOT AT ALL
THE TIME

ALMOST ALL

2.
During your time with FYSH, how much did you **talk with other people** about what you wrote and talked about in the workshop?

ALMOST NOTHING

QUITE A LOT

3.

During your time with FYSH, how much did you **write** - outside the workshop - about what you wrote and talked about in the workshop?

NOTHING AT ALL

QUITE A LOT

4.

If you wrote outside the workshop, what did you write?

5.

Overall, how much did you reveal your **true** emotions in writing and discussion during the FYSH workshop?

NOT AT ALL
TIME

ALL THE

6.

During your time with FYSH, how much **sadness** have you felt?

NONE AT ALL
LOT

QUITE A

7.
During your time with FYSH, how much **happiness** have you felt?

NONE AT ALL
LOT

QUITE A

Section Three - After FYSH

1.
Now that you've completed FYSH, how much **positive** effect do you think it will have for you?

NONE AT ALL
A LOT

QUITE

2.
Now that you've completed FYSH, how much **negative** effect do you think it will have for you?

NONE AT ALL
A LOT

QUITE

3.
Overall, how **meaningful** has FYSH been for you?

NOT AT ALL
MUCH

VERY

4.
If you had the chance to do it over again, would you participate in **another** FYSH workshop?

ABSOLUTELY NOT

ABSOLUTELY YES

5.
Do you have any other feelings about your participation in FYSH?

Spring, 2008

Hello:

Thank you very much for your help in locating participants for the writing project *Foster Youth Seen and Heard*.

Children and youth who have spent time in the child welfare system can best speak about their foster care experiences, and uniquely assist researchers, policy makers, and social service professionals who want to better understand foster care from the perspective of those it is intended to serve.

Youth and young adults who have participated in past FYSH workshops tell us that they have truly valued their involvement in the program, gaining a unique opportunity to express themselves as individuals and also find commonality with their fellow FYSH participants.

Project *FYSH* has received authorization from the Institutional Review Boards (for the protection of people who participate in research) at the University of Illinois and the Department of Children and Family Services.

The enclosed Fact Sheet tells you what we are asking of you, and explains a little more about what Project FYSH involves.

To thank you for your help, we will formally acknowledge your assistance in all reports or publications that result from Project *FYSH*, and we will provide you with copies of these reports or publications. If you wish, we also will consult with you in person on the findings from Project *FYSH*.

Project *FYSH* has received praise for its role in giving voice to foster children and youth and for sharing information to make the system better. Your help in locating young people who want to become part of *FYSH* is vital. If you have any questions at all, please don't hesitate to contact me at dfinet@uiuc.edu or 217.265.0192. Again, we are very grateful for your help with this important effort.

Sincerely yours,

Dayna Finet
Project FYSH Director

Foster Youth Seen and Heard (Project FYSH)

Children and Family Research Center, School of Social Work, University of Illinois

Fact Sheet

What Is Project FYSH?

Foster Youth Seen and Heard (Project FYSH) began in 2003 as an initiative of the Children and Family Research Center, in the School of Social Work at the University of Illinois, supported by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. Its aim is twofold. First, FYSH gives young people who have experienced time in the foster care system an opportunity to express themselves and share their perceptions with others. Second, the information generated through FYSH helps researchers, policy makers, and the professionals who serve foster children and youth a chance to better understand life in care, from the viewpoint of those the system is designed to serve.

FYSH operates through writing workshops. Each workshop consists of five sessions. Four of these are two hours long, and mainly involve a series of writing exercises. The last session is up to six hours long, and participants will use audio and video technologies to record some of their impressions of foster care experience.

Eligible FYSH participants include young people between 16 and 24 who have spent any length of time in foster care, whether or not they remained in care, reunified with their birth families, or became adopted.

All FYSH sessions will take place at the Children and Family Research Center, unless an alternate location is more convenient for the members of the group. Participants will receive a map and directions to the Center, or to an alternate location, during an informational interview prior to the first workshop session.

Participants will receive a \$25 retail gift card of their choice for each two-hour session they complete and a \$75 gift card for the six-hour session, plus an additional \$25 bonus card for completing all five sessions. There is no monetary cost to youth and young adults who participate in FYSH.

How Can You Help?

We're asking you to help us find potential FYSH participants.

For minor youth (ages 16 and 17), we are asking you to:

- a) Distribute a letter of invitation and flyer, prepared by us, to youth within your agency who have experienced any length of time in foster care;
- b) Allow interested youth to contact you after receiving this invitation;
- c) Contact Dayna Finet (265.0192 or dfinet@uiuc.edu) to arrange an informational interview;
- d) Attend the interview with the youth; and
- e) If both you and the youth agree to participation, sign a formal *consent* on the youth's behalf (the youth will receive *assent* forms, which also must be signed to participate in FYSH).

If both you and the youth agree to participate, the Children and Family Research Center will obtain additional (required) *consent* from the DCFS Guardian Office.

For young adults, whether in or not still in care (ages 18 through 24), we are asking you to:

- a) Distribute the letter of invitation and flyer.

The invitation to adults asks those interested to contact Dayna Finet directly to schedule an interview.

Spring, 2008

Hello!

We would like to take this opportunity to introduce you to Foster Youth Seen and Heard—otherwise known as “Project FYSH.”

Project FYSH is a program designed to ask foster children and youth about their experiences. We do this through writing, audio and video production, and lots of discussion among ourselves.

Project FYSH is a way for foster children and youth to express themselves, but it also is a way to let the people who make decisions about the foster care system know what you think.

We invite you to consider participation in Project FYSH this year.

Here’s what’s involved. It’s a five session workshop, with four two-hour writing sessions and one audio/video production session, about six hours, usually on a Saturday. We’ll set the exact dates and times based on what’s convenient for all the workshop participants. We provide all the materials and support you’ll need.

If you become part of FYSH, we’ll thank you with a \$25 retail gift card for each two-hour session you complete, a \$75 card for the Saturday session, and another \$25 if you complete all five sessions. There is no monetary cost to you.

If you want to know more about FYSH, please tell your case worker, who will contact us. Then we’ll set up an interview to talk with you more about the program. We hope you’ll consider joining us and look forward to meeting you!

Sincerely,

Dayna Finet
Project FYSH Director



ARE YOU:

**In foster care or formerly in care?
Between 16 and 24 years old?
Interested in telling your story?**

CHILDREN AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTER

**Seeks participants for a
writing and multimedia workshop
to elicit stories of foster care**

COMPENSATION PAID

CONTACT DAYNA FINET AT THE CHILDREN AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTER TO
SET UP AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW, 217.265.0192 OR DFINET@UIUC.EDU.



ARE YOU:

*IN FOSTER CARE OR FORMERLY IN CARE?
BETWEEN 18 AND 24 YEARS OLD?
INTERESTED IN TELLING YOUR STORY?*

THE CHILDREN AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTER

SEEKS PARTICIPANTS IN A WRITING AND MULTIMEDIA WORKSHOP TO ELICIT STORIES OF FOSTER CARE EXPERIENCE FROM THOSE WHO KNOW IT BEST — FOSTER YOUTH AND FORMER FOSTER YOUTH. YOUR STORIES WILL HELP IMPROVE THE SYSTEM FOR EVERYONE IN FOSTER CARE.

UP TO \$200 COMPENSATION FOR COMPLETION
OF THE ENTIRE WORKSHOP.

CONTACT DAYNA FINET AT THE CHILDREN AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTER TO SET UP AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW, 217.265.0192 OR DFINET@UIUC.EDU.