2026 Older Youth Retreat Focus Group Report

Youth Perspectives on Preparing Families for Older Youth

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Prepared for: Independent Living Project of the PACWRC

Overview

Youth who attended the 2026 Older Youth Retreat were invited to participate in a focus group to share their perspectives on preparing families to welcome teens or older youth into their home. The questions explored what a prepared family looks like, how family preparedness affects youths' daily lives, what training to include to prepare new resource parents to support teens and older youth, which families should be recruited and how to reach them, and what youth would like those families to understand about welcoming teens and older youth into their home (see Appendix for focus group questions). All focus groups were conducted in-person during the retreat in August 2026. Prior to the retreat, focus group facilitators and notetakers participated in a focus group training session hosted by the PACWRC Research & Evaluation Team to promote consistency in how questions were asked and discussions facilitated across groups. In addition, youth received a printed copy of the focus group questions to reference throughout the discussion.

All youth at the retreat were assigned to one of eight peer groups that met daily throughout the retreat. Youth were invited to participate in the focus groups and were required to provide assent before participating. Youth could decline to participate. Each focus group was conducted within these peer groups, to help youth feel comfortable and encourage open discussion. Table 1 provides summary information about the composition of the groups, which includes youth of varying ages and from different counties. Figure 1 shows the location of counties represented by youth at the retreat. Notes from each focus group were coded and analyzed to identify key themes that emerged from the discussions.

Table 1. Focus Group Details			
Number of Focus Groups	8		
Total Number of Retreat Attendees	85		
Number of Participants per Focus Group	9-12		
Ages of Participants Under 18 18 and older	 42 (49%) 43 (51%)		
Number of Counties Represented	31		
Counties Represented	Allegheny Armstrong Blair Bucks Butler Cambria Carbon Clearfield Crawford Dauphin	Erie Fayette Franklin Indiana Jefferson Juniata Lackawanna Lancaster Lehigh Luzerne	Mifflin Montgomery Northampton Perry Philadelphia Schuylkill Susquehanna Washington Westmoreland Wyoming York

Figure 1. PA counties represented by youth at the 2026 older youth retreat.



Considerations for Interpreting the Results

Each focus group was conducted by a unique facilitator and notetaker who were employees of the PA Child Welfare Resource Center. Facilitators used a semi-structured format when conducting the focus groups. The results are based on notes gathered from the focus group conversations, not full transcripts. Additionally, identifying characteristics of youth providing a particular response were not recorded.

Figures throughout the report visualize the relative frequency of themes identified in youth responses. The size of each area within a figure reflects how often that theme was mentioned, with larger areas representing more frequently mentioned themes.

The results may not represent all older youth served by the Independent Living (IL) Program in Pennsylvania due to the small sample size and the fact that focus groups were not conducted until saturation was reached (i.e., no new themes emerged). However, the information gathered from the focus groups provides valuable insight into the youths' experiences regarding family preparedness, caregiver training, and recruitment of families for teens and older youth.

Software/AI Use Statement: Focus group data were analyzed using NVivo 15 to support qualitative coding and thematic analysis. Microsoft Copilot (GPT-5 model) was used as an assistive tool for reviewing, consolidating, and summarizing coded thematic content. All analytic decisions and interpretations remained the responsibility of the research team. Quantitative data management, analysis, and descriptive summaries were conducted using Microsoft Excel.

Contact the PACWRC Research and Evaluation department to request any reasonable accommodations that will facilitate readability.

Focus Group Results

Overview of Themes

Table 2 presents an overview of the themes that emerged from the focus group data, organized according to the questions asked. Supporting details for all themes are provided following Table 2.

Table 2. Themes

Question Topic	Primary Themes		
How a Prepared Family Looks in General	• Understanding and responding to youth needs • Be ready to support youth in foster care	• Understand youth experience and who they are • Have a comfortable and caring home	• Have enough resources • Accept youth in foster care like your own children

Table 2 (continued)			
Preparedness of a Family Youth Lived With	• Responsive to youth needs • Supporting youth's mental health	• Prepared space or items for youth • Unprepared space for youth	• Unprepared to support emotional and mental health • Unprepared to handle conflict in the home
Preparedness of Kinship Families	• Support emotional and mental health • Prepared space or items	• Unprepared space or financial resources • Conflicting values • Complicated relationship dynamics	• Youth feeling unheard • Unprepared to support emotional and mental health
How Preparedness Impacts Daily Life	• Support for well-being and success • Lack of respect, inclusion, cultural understanding	• Not prepared for youth in foster care • Restrictions and limited opportunities	• Negative emotional impacts • Logistical barriers
Training to Prepare New Resource Parents	• Emotion regulation, de-escalation, and trauma awareness	• Mental health awareness • Age-appropriate parenting styles and discipline	• Supporting youth-specific needs • Communication
Recruiting Families: Types of Families to Reach	• Accepting and open • Safe and emotionally healthy families • Structured and fair	• Prior experience in foster care • Preferred family characteristics • Prepared and knowledgeable about foster care	• Value diversity • Adequate capacity and resources • Patient and understanding
Recruiting Families: Where or How to Reach Them	• Community events • Ads on TV, social media, internet	• Youth recruiters • Recruit in affluent areas	• Wealth is not enough • Recruitment messaging
Recruiting Families: What Families Should Know	• Each youth has their own needs	• Trust and respect take time	• Long-term commitment
Advice for Adults Considering Fostering or Adopting a Teen	• Judgement-free and open minded	• Help youth process emotions and feel comfortable	• Patience • Open communication

Several **common themes** emerged across responses to multiple questions:

- **Individual needs and experiences:** Youth emphasized that every youth has different needs, experiences, backgrounds, and circumstances.
- **Acceptance, belonging, and respect:** Youth emphasized the importance of feeling welcomed, included, heard, respected, and treated fairly within the family.
- **Trusting and supportive relationships:** Youth emphasized trust, patience, open communication, listening, and emotional support from caregivers.
- **Understanding and affirming youth needs:** Youth emphasized the importance of families understanding adolescent development, mental health and trauma, increasing independence, and the experiences of older youth in foster care.
- **Supporting youth in and beyond the home:** Youth emphasized the importance of families having the space, resources, time, transportation, and other practical supports needed to support their lives at home and beyond the home.

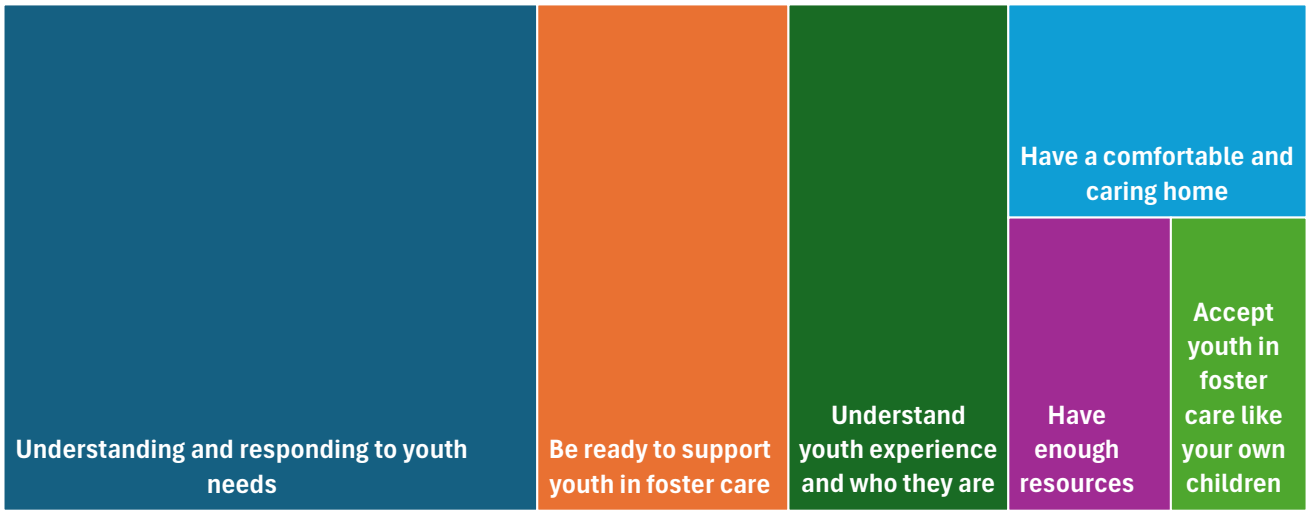
These common themes provide context for the more detailed findings presented in the sections that follow.

How a Prepared Family Looks in General

To begin, we are going to talk about families that are prepared to have a teenager in their home. In general, what does a prepared family mean to you?

Youth described several characteristics of families that are prepared to welcome and support teens and older youth. Figure 2 presents the themes identified in their responses.

Figure 2. What a prepared family looks like



- **Understanding and responding to youth needs**
  - Many youth emphasized that prepared families recognize that every youth has different needs and may require different types of support. Several youth discussed the importance of families understanding individual circumstances and being prepared to respond to those needs. Examples included:
    - Having essential items ready when a youth arrives like clothes, towels, hygiene items, and a laundry basket
    - Having a private room or personal space that provides privacy
    - Supporting educational and career planning, such as applying to college or trade school and obtaining financial aid
    - Understanding mental health needs, diagnoses, and triggers
    - Taking time to get to know youth as individuals rather than making assumptions about them
    - Recognizing that youth may need time and patience as they adjust to a new home
- **Be ready to support youth in foster care**
  - Several youth emphasized that families should be prepared for the unique challenges and responsibilities of fostering teens and older youth. Participants discussed the importance of:
    - Understanding typical youth behaviors, such as moodiness and spending more time with friends
    - Learning how to de-escalate conflict and respond to anger or other strong emotions
    - Being emotionally available and supportive without pressuring youth to talk before they are ready
- **Understand youth experience and who they are**
  - Several youth emphasized the importance of families understanding youths' backgrounds, experiences, and circumstances before placement. Participants discussed the need for patience, recognizing that youth may need time to adjust, and understanding how past experiences can affect communication, behavior, and relationships.
  - Youth also stressed the importance of families receiving complete information about a youth's needs and circumstances so they can provide appropriate support. For example, some youth described situations in which resource parents did not receive complete information about a youth's medical needs, special needs, or other important circumstances before placement, making it more difficult for families to prepare appropriately.
- **Have a comfortable and caring home**
  - Youth described the importance of living in a home environment where they felt comfortable, welcomed, and valued. Participants emphasized the importance of a clean and peaceful home, consistent support from caregivers, and opportunities for open communication and trust-building. For example, one youth described a weekly family check-in where family members discussed

concerns and disagreements, creating an opportunity for open communication and ensuring everyone was heard.

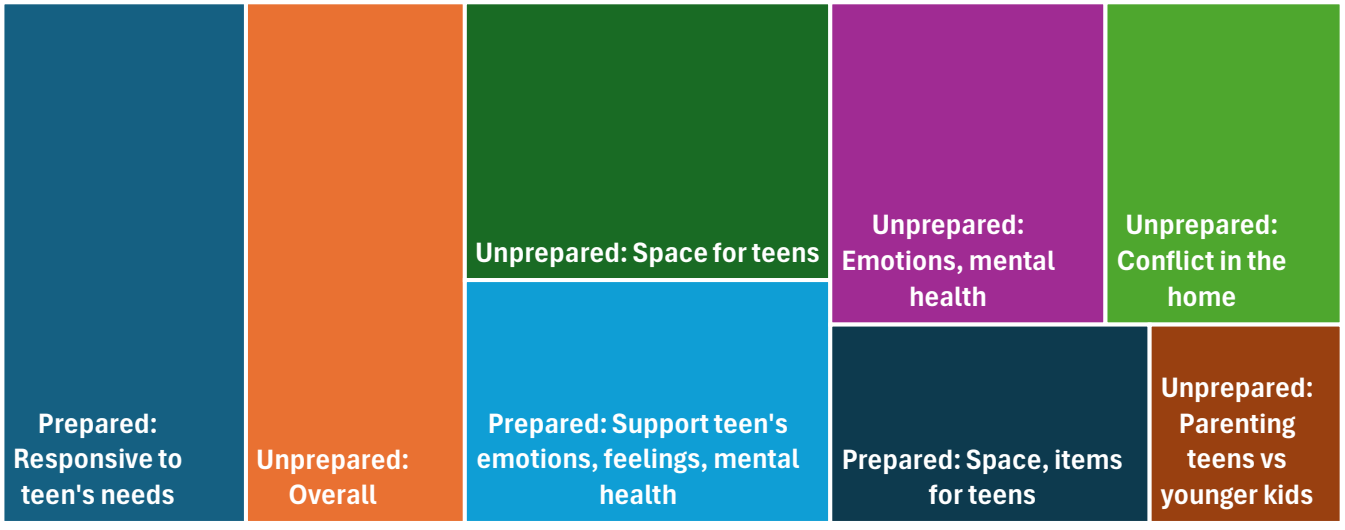
- **Have enough resources**
  - Youth emphasized the importance of families having the financial and housing resources needed to support teens and older youth. Participants discussed the need for adequate living space, financial stability, and resources to support the household. For example, youth noted the importance of having appropriate sleeping arrangements, including providing space that is suitable for older youth rather than requiring them to share a room with a younger child.
- **Accept youth in foster care like your own children**
  - Several youth emphasized the importance of feeling welcomed, accepted, and treated as a full member of the family. Participants discussed wanting to be accepted for who they are and treated similarly to biological children. For example, youth described wanting families to welcome them "with open arms" and help them feel connected, valued, and genuinely wanted in the home.

Preparedness of Families Youth Lived With

Now, instead of speaking in general, think about a specific family you lived with as a teen or older youth. How would you describe the family's level of preparedness? What did they do or say that showed this?

Youth described a wide range of preparedness when discussing families they have lived with as a teen or older youth. Figure 3a summarizes key themes. Descriptions of each theme are included below.

Figure 3a. How would you describe your current or previous families' level of preparedness?



Prepared families. When reflecting on prepared families, three major themes emerged:

- **Responsive to youths' needs:** Youth emphasized the importance of open communication with families to ensure adults understood their needs, behavioral traits, language barriers, and communication preferences. These families showed they were responsive and adaptive to their needs by helping youth feel comfortable and safe to talk about their needs and ask for support.
- **Supporting youths' emotions and mental health:** Youth discussed how prepared families built comfort and trust by helping them process their emotions and support their mental health. These families created a safe space for youth to open up on their own time.
- **Prepared space and items:** Youth emphasized the importance of having a dedicated space prepared for the youth upon their arrival (e.g., a room or bed). Youth appreciated it when families had necessary items, such as clothing or hygiene items, available for them to help with their transition to a new home.

Unprepared families. Youth also described how families have been unprepared for teens or older youth. Five major themes related to unpreparedness emerged:

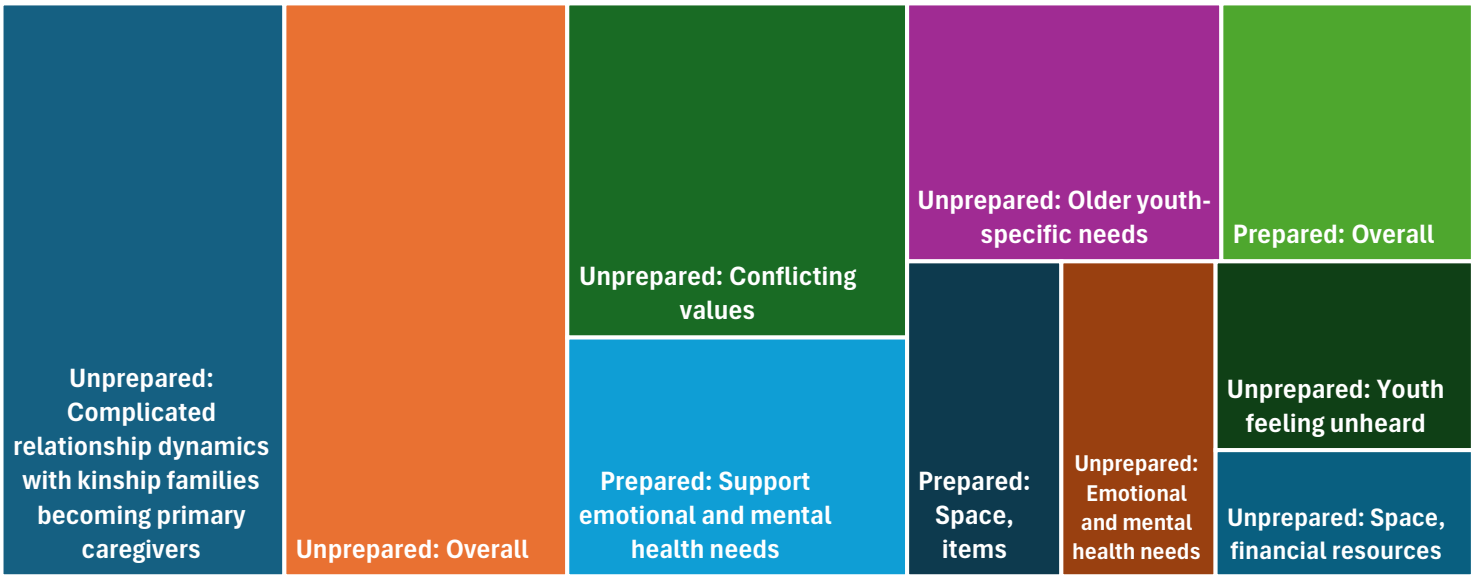
- **Unprepared space or items for youth:** Some families did not have a dedicated space ready for the youth, or they didn't have items youth needed upon their arrival. Youth described how having to shop for necessary items upon their arrival added stress to an already difficult situation.
- **Unprepared for youth's emotional or mental health:** Some families were unprepared for supporting youths' mental and emotional health and neurodivergence. Youth described families that lacked trauma-awareness, and how youths' behaviors and emotional reactions are often related to trauma responses or triggers.
- **Conflict or favoritism in the home:** Youth discussed how some families were unprepared to deal with conflict or favoritism in the home. Youth described how some families demonstrated favoritism towards biological children, such as giving youth in foster care more chores compared to biological children, or youth in foster care feeling blamed for biological children's behavior.
- **Unprepared for teen or older youth-specific needs:** Youth discussed how families with experience parenting younger children were sometimes unprepared for the different needs and challenges of parenting teens and older youth. Youth described differences in values (e.g., cultural values, politics, religion) and gender/sexual identities that families were unprepared to navigate. Families were also unprepared to support older youths' lives and activities outside the home (e.g., sports, school groups, or jobs).
- **General unpreparedness:** Youth also described families that were overall unprepared to parent teens or older youth. In one group, a youth shared that "none of the families are prepared!" with many other participants agreeing. Other youth described situations in which they felt families were not properly vetted, feeling like families were fostering youth for money rather than to actually support them.

Preparedness of Kinship Families

For those of you who have been placed in kinship care with relatives, how prepared were they to have a teen in the home?

Youth in kinship care described a similar wide range of preparedness and unpreparedness when living with relatives or community members. Figure 3b summarizes key themes. Descriptions of each theme are included below.

Figure 3b. Kinship family preparedness



Prepared Kinship Families. When discussing kinship families that the youth felt were prepared to welcome a teen or older youth into their home, three main themes emerged:

- **Prepared to support youths' emotional and mental health:** Youth discussed how their kinship families were prepared to support their mental and emotional health by taking time to listen, hear their perspective, and give youth space to process emotions. Some youth commented on how kinship families' familiarity with the youth and their history made it easier to adjust and feel understood. This support from kinship families helped youth feel safe and comfortable when discussing their emotions and mental health.
- **Prepared space:** Youth mentioned their kinship families demonstrated preparedness by having a space ready for them when they arrived and providing necessary items (e.g., hygiene items, clothes).
- **Prepared overall:** Youth described their kinship families as being overall prepared to welcome a teen or older youth into their home. Youth mentioned these families met their needs, and their kinship families were prepared to help them transition to adulthood.

Unprepared Kinship Families. When discussing kinship families that the youth felt were unprepared for a teen or older youth, seven main themes emerged:

- **Complicated relationship dynamics with kinship families becoming primary caregivers:** Youth discussed how kinship families sometimes struggled to transition to a parental role (rather than just being a grandparent, aunt/uncle, sibling, etc.). Youth also reflected on their own challenges with this transition, struggling to adjust with the kinship family taking on parental responsibilities. Some youth shared that they needed more structure or parental guidance, which their kinship families were sometimes unprepared to provide. Youth also shared challenges with kinship caregivers staying in close contact with the youths' biological parents, which led to caregivers pushing boundaries or comparing the youth to their parents in a negative way.
- **Unprepared overall:** Youth discussed how some kinship families were generally unprepared, including being mentally unprepared to support a teen or older youth, or unable to financially support the youth.
- **Conflicting values:** Youth discussed how kinship families were unprepared to manage conflicting values. Kinship families sometimes had different religious or cultural values that youth felt were being forced upon them.
- **Unprepared for youth's needs:** Youth shared how kinship families, similar to foster families, are sometimes unprepared to support youth's unique needs as teens or older youth. For example, kinship families may not be prepared to support youth's lives outside the home, such as taking them to after school activities, sports, or jobs. Youth also discussed how kinship families were sometimes unprepared to help them transition to adulthood (e.g., helping them get bank accounts/credit cards, car insurance, or phones).
- **Unprepared to support emotional or mental health needs:** Youth discussed how kinship families were sometimes unprepared to navigate youths' emotions (e.g., having a "bad attitude"). Families sometimes lacked knowledge around supporting mental health diagnoses and neurodivergence. In one example, a youth shared how she felt like she was "being put back into the same situation" she was taken out of, and her kinship families did not take accountability and struggled to help her process her emotions.
- **Unprepared space or financial resources:** A couple of youth mentioned how their kinship families did not have space prepared for the youth or were unable to financially accommodate a teen or older youth joining their family.
- **Youth feeling unheard:** Some youth felt their kinship families or county caseworkers did not listen to them about issues within their household. Youth felt like their concerns were ignored, either by their families, the county, or both.

How Preparedness Impacts Daily Life

In what ways did a family's preparedness impact your day-to-day life beyond the home, like school, friends, or activities? Please share some examples if you can.

Youth described how a family's level of preparedness affected their day-to-day lives beyond the home. Figure 4 presents the themes identified in their responses.

Figure 4. How preparedness impacts day-to-day life



- **Support for well-being and success**
  - Many youth described how prepared families positively affected multiple areas of their lives beyond the home. Participants discussed increased opportunities, stronger support systems, greater confidence, and improved preparation for adulthood. Examples included:
    - Participating in sports, clubs, church activities, and other extracurricular activities
    - Receiving support with school, college, trade school, scholarships, and employment
    - Learning life skills such as banking, budgeting, transportation, and personal responsibility
    - Building confidence, friendships, and other supportive relationships
    - Receiving support tailored to individual needs, including mental health, life skills, and personal goals
- **Lack of respect, inclusion, cultural understanding**
  - Several youth described ways that a family's lack of respect or inclusion negatively affected their day-to-day lives. Participants discussed feeling excluded from family decisions, having their privacy disregarded, and feeling unwelcome or treated differently within the household.
  - Issues related to cultural, racial, and religious understanding also emerged in several discussions. Youth emphasized the importance of caregivers understanding and respecting youths' identities and backgrounds. For example, youth described challenges related to hair care, personal

appearance, religious practices, and cultural differences, which sometimes contributed to feelings of exclusion and lower self-confidence.

- **Not prepared for youth in foster care**
  - Several youth described situations in which caregivers were not prepared for the unique experiences, needs, and challenges of teens and older youth in foster care. Participants emphasized that youth may enter placement with difficult past experiences, mental health needs, established coping strategies, and varying levels of maturity. For example, youth discussed situations in which caregivers did not understand a youth's maturity level (e.g., purchasing Barbie dolls for an older youth), expected youth to adapt quickly to a new placement, or struggled to respond appropriately to youths' mental health and behavioral health needs.
- **Restrictions and limited opportunities**
  - Several youth described how unprepared families sometimes imposed restrictions that limited opportunities for socialization, extracurricular involvement, and age-appropriate independence. Examples included:
    - Not being allowed to participate in sports or extracurricular activities
    - Not being allowed to spend time with friends or visit friends' homes
    - Being denied freedoms that biological children in the household had (e.g., having a phone)
    - Being stuck at home due to limited transportation and access to activities
- **Negative emotional impacts**
  - Some youth described negative emotional consequences when families were not prepared to meet their needs or provide a supportive environment including depression, low self-confidence, emotional exhaustion, and thoughts of self-harm resulting from feeling belittled, judged, misunderstood, or lacking support from caregivers. For example, youth described being called names by caregivers, being teased at school because their clothing smelled from conditions in the home, and feeling emotionally drained by ongoing negative interactions with adults.
- **Logistical barriers**
  - Some youth described practical challenges that affected their ability to participate in school, work, and other activities. Participants discussed difficulties related to transportation, scheduling, and communication with caregivers. For example, youth described being unable to work certain shifts, waiting hours for rides after activities, and having previously arranged transportation plans fall through.

Training to Prepare New Resource Parents

What should be included in training to make sure a new resource parent is prepared to support teens and older youth?

Youth shared many different ideas about what should be included in training for new resource parents to prepare them to welcome a teen or older youth into their home. Figure 5 summarizes the training themes that arose from focus group discussions. The primary themes are described below, and other less prominent themes are also listed at the end of this section.

Figure 5. Training to Prepare New Resource Parents



Primary themes about training new resource parents:

- **Emotion regulation, de-escalation, and trauma awareness:** Many youth discussed the importance of training new resource parents on emotion regulation (both for the resource parents and helping youth learn to regulate their emotions). Youth also emphasized the need for de-escalation training to better manage potential conflict in the home. Youth also discussed the importance of trauma-awareness to help parents understand the impact trauma can have on teens' or older youths' emotions and behavior.
- **Mental and behavioral health awareness:** Youth discussed how resource parents need a better understanding of mental and behavioral health to support youth with mental health diagnoses, neurodivergence, or substance use issues. Some youth also mentioned the importance of understanding how youths' lived experiences impact their behavioral health. Youth also mentioned the importance of resource parent's mental health, with one youth suggesting that prospective resource parents should be required to attend therapy prior to becoming a resource parent.
- **Parenting styles and age-appropriate discipline:** Youth talked about the importance of families learning about different parenting and discipline styles, especially age-appropriate discipline for teens and older youth. Youth expressed a desire for discipline and punishment to be meaningful and encourage growth rather

than being punitive. A couple youth shared how families would use the threat of being put back into the foster care system as a form of discipline or punishment, and the negative impact this had on the youth's feelings of trust, safety, and stability.

- **How to communicate with youth:** Youth recommended new resource parents should be trained in different communication styles and how to build trust and open communication with older youth. New resource parents need to understand how youths' trauma and lived experience can impact communication.
- **Supporting youth-specific needs:** Youth emphasized the importance of training new resource parents on needs specific to teens and older youth, such as building responsibility and transitioning to adulthood. Some youth also mentioned the importance of technology literacy and teaching youth about appropriate technology use (e.g., phones, social media). New resource parents need to be prepared to help youth access necessary resources and services, such as accessing personal documents (e.g., birth certificates) and therapy services.
- **Other training themes:**
    - Knowing the reasons why youth are in care to better understand youths' behavior and attitudes.
    - The importance of keeping homes clean and organized.
    - Building cultural awareness around race, gender, and sexuality.
    - Ensuring fairness in the home, especially when youth are entering homes with biological children.
    - Different age groups and child development specific to teens and older youth.
    - Understanding common health issues, such as allergies, chronic illness, and providing necessary medication.
    - Providing pre-placement meetings with prospective resource parents, when possible, to give youth an opportunity to get to know the family.
    - Some youth expressed a desire to share their lived experiences during training to better prepare families for how to support older youth.
    - Youth expressed the importance of strict training requirements to ensure resource parents complete the necessary training and demonstrate they learned the necessary skills and information during the training.

Recruiting Families: Types of Families to Reach

Now imagine you are on a committee trying to recruit families for teens in foster care. We are going to ask a few questions about who to recruit, how to reach them, and what to share with them.

Based on what you've shared, what kinds of families would you want to reach?

Youth identified several characteristics of families they believed should be prioritized in recruitment efforts. Figure 6 presents themes identified in their responses.

Figure 6. What kind of families do you want to reach?



- **Accepting and open**
  - Many youth emphasized the importance of recruiting families that are open and accepting of youths' backgrounds, religions, personalities, and experiences. Participants also discussed the importance of listening to youth and allowing them to have a voice. For example, some youth expressed frustration that youth in foster care are not always listened to because they are viewed as "just kids."
- **Safe and emotionally healthy families**
  - Many youth emphasized the importance of recruiting families that can provide a safe, stable, and emotionally healthy environment. Participants described these families in several ways, including:
    - Being emotionally stable and able to support youth through challenges
    - Being comfortable having difficult conversations with youth
    - Being mindful and present in youths' lives
  - Several youth also expressed concern about recruiting families who may be motivated primarily by financial considerations rather than a genuine desire to support youth.
- **Structured and fair**
  - Many youth emphasized the importance of recruiting families that are organized and provide clear structure, predictable routines, consistent expectations, and fair rules. Some youth also described the importance of families balancing structure with understanding and flexibility rather than being either overly strict or overly permissive.

- **Prior experience in foster care**
  - A few youth mentioned recruiting families with personal experience in foster care. Participants described these families as being more likely to understand youths' experiences, challenges, and needs because of their own background in care. Some youth also noted that families with foster care experience may better understand the circumstances that led youth into care and the difficulties they may face.
- **Preferred family characteristics**
  - A few youth mentioned certain family characteristics they believed could be beneficial when recruiting resource families. Participants discussed preferences related to parent age, family size, previous experience parenting youth, and the ability to keep siblings together. For example, some youth expressed a preference for younger resource parents because they may better relate to teens, while others preferred smaller families or families that could keep siblings together.
- **Prepared and knowledgeable about foster care**
  - Youth described the importance of recruiting families who are knowledgeable about foster care and prepared to meet youths' physical, emotional, and developmental needs. Participants discussed the need for families to be trauma-informed, mentally prepared, and equipped to respond to a variety of situations youth may experience (e.g., administering medications, supporting mental health needs, bullying).
- **Value diversity**
  - Some youth discussed the importance of recruiting families that are accepting of different cultures, religions, backgrounds, and identities. Participants emphasized that families should be respectful of youths' beliefs and not force youth to participate in religious practices. Some youth also expressed interest in recruiting diverse families, including families of color and gay families. For example, one youth described having an accent and experiencing racial slurs from a foster parent.
- **Adequate capacity and resources**
  - Some youth described the importance of recruiting families that have sufficient financial and practical resources to support teens and older youth. Participants described the need for families to have the time, attention, transportation, and financial stability necessary to meet youths' needs. For example, some youth noted that larger, busier families may have more difficulty providing individual attention, while others emphasized the importance of having reliable transportation for activities and therapy appointments.

Patient and understanding

- A few youth mentioned the importance of recruiting families that are patient and understanding. Participants discussed the need for families to recognize that youth may be dealing with emotional challenges, behavioral changes, and other aspects of adolescent development. Youth also noted that patience and understanding can be particularly important when supporting teens who have experienced foster care previously and other challenges.

Recruiting Families: Where and How to Reach Them

Now imagine you are on a committee trying to recruit families for teens in foster care. We are going to ask a few questions about who to recruit, how to reach them, and what to share with them.

Where or how would you reach the families you are trying to recruit?

Youth identified several strategies for reaching families who may be interested in fostering or adopting teens and older youth. Themes that emerged from their responses are described below.

- **Community events**
  - Many youth suggested using community events as a way to connect with prospective foster and adoptive families. Some also suggested creating opportunities for youth to participate in these events and interact with prospective families. Examples include:
    - Youth participation in events such as movie nights and open discussions with prospective families
    - Setting up booths at county fairs, sporting events, and pride events
    - Foster family recruitment events where prospective families could learn more about fostering
    - Providing information and resources at community events where families gather
- **Ads on TV, social media, internet**
  - Many youth suggested using television, social media, and online platforms to reach prospective foster and adoptive families. For example, one youth suggested using television advertisements similar to the well-known commercials that encourage pet adoption and evoke an emotional response from viewers. Others mentioned websites, social media platforms such as TikTok and Facebook, and podcasts. Some youth also suggested updating the Youth Advisory Board website.
- **Youth recruiters**
  - A few youth mentioned involving youth in recruitment efforts. Participants described how hearing directly from youth with foster care experience can help prospective families learn more about fostering and the experiences of youth in care. Examples included youth participation in recruitment events, youth

sharing their experiences through videos and podcasts, and Youth Advisory Boards helping spread the word about fostering.

- **Recruit in affluent areas**
  - A few youth suggested recruiting families in affluent communities. For example, several youth agreed that recruitment efforts should focus on "rich neighborhoods."
- **Wealth is not enough**
  - A few youth noted that having financial resources alone does not make a family a good fit for fostering or adoption. Participants described experiences in which families had money, nice homes, or other signs of financial success but still struggled to meet youths' needs or provide appropriate support.
- **Recruitment messaging**
  - A couple of youth discussed recruitment messaging. Participants felt that prospective families should hear about both the challenges and rewards of fostering teens and older youth. One youth also mentioned that, when communicating these challenges, some youth have been taught they are the problem and cautioned against reinforcing that message in recruitment efforts.

Recruiting Families: What Families Should Know

Now imagine you are on a committee trying to recruit families for teens in foster care. We are going to ask a few questions about who to recruit, how to reach them, and what to share with them.

What would you want the families to understand about welcoming a teen into their home?

Youth shared their perspectives on what prospective foster and adoptive families should know before welcoming a teen or older youth into their home. Key themes from these discussions are described below.

- **Each youth has their own needs**
  - Youth discussed the importance of understanding that not all teens in foster care are the same. Participants noted that youth can have different needs, interests, experiences, and goals. They also discussed common misconceptions about youth in foster care, including assumptions that youth are "bad," "too far gone," or unable to succeed. For example, youth noted that some teens have mental health needs while others do not, and that families should be prepared to support youths' activities, friendships, jobs, and other commitments.
- **Trust and respect take time**
  - Youth discussed the importance of not expecting instant trust, respect, or obedience from youth. Participants noted that youth may be standoffish or secluded in the beginning and that families should not take these reactions personally. Youth also emphasized the importance of giving teens time to adapt and adjust.

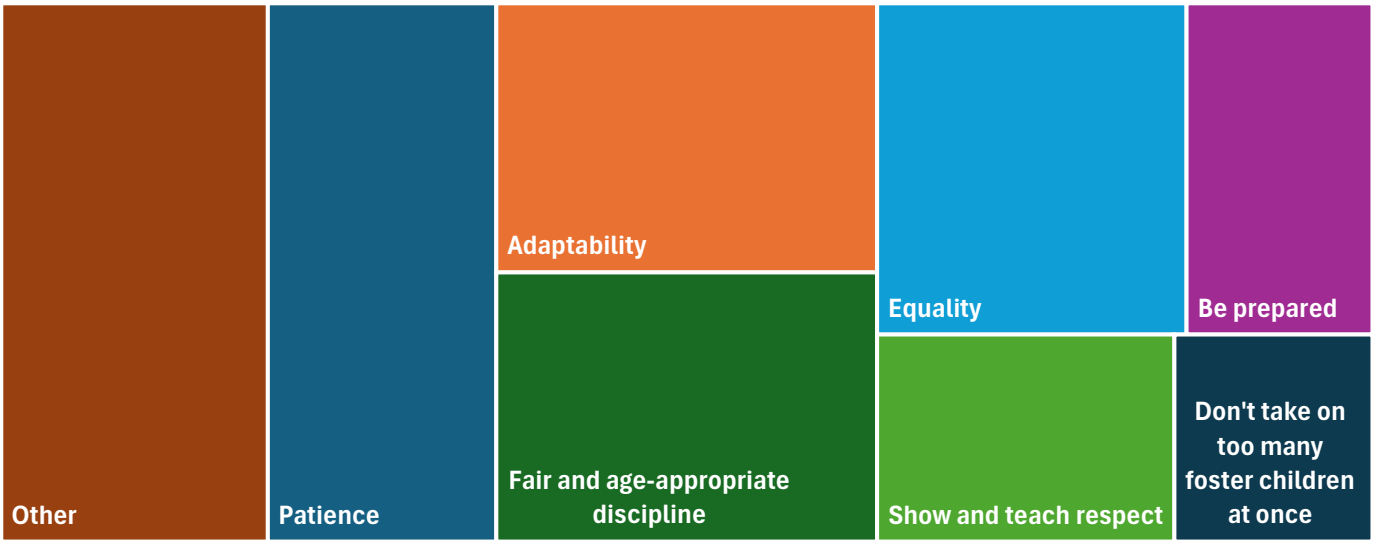
- **Long-term commitment**
  - A few youth discussed the importance of long-term commitment and stability when caring for teens and older youth. Youth described this commitment as valuable to their well-being because it can provide stability and relationships with resource parents that extend beyond placement. For example, one youth described a foster home where youth who formerly lived there continued to return and visit after becoming adults, while another spoke about the stress and uncertainty of not knowing where they would live from one placement to the next.

Advice for Adults Considering Fostering or Adopting a Teen

Finally, what is one piece of advice you'd give to adults thinking about fostering or adopting a teen?

Youth shared a wide range of advice they would give to adults considering fostering or adopting a teen or older youth. Figure 7 summarizes key themes related to advice for prospective families. The most prominent themes are described below. Additional, less prominent themes are described at the end of this section.

Figure 7. Advice for prospective resource parents



Primary themes:

- **Judgement-free, open minded:** Give youth a chance to be who they are without judging them based on their past experiences and background. Keep an open mind and remember that every youth is different.
- **Help youth process emotions and feel comfortable:** Youth going into care are experiencing a wide range of emotions. Be prepared to help youth process difficult emotions to build feelings of comfort and safety.
- **Open communication:** Resource parents should take the time to get to know the youth, and be aware of the impact a parent's words can have on the youth. Take the time to listen to the youth, and help them feel safe to speak up and voice their opinion.
- **Patience:** Resource parents need to be patient and take things one step at a time. Recognize that it will take time for the youth to open up, feel comfortable, and adapt to their new home.

Youth also offered advice about being adaptable and prepared, using fair and age-appropriate discipline, treating children in the household equally, showing and teaching respect, and being mindful of the number of foster children a family can support.

Insights and Recommendations

The following insights and recommendations are grounded in what youth shared about family preparedness, recruitment, and support for teens and older youth in foster care.

Recruit families who are prepared to build relationships, not just provide placement. Across questions, youth consistently emphasized trust, respect, patience, acceptance, listening, and emotional support. Youth described successful placements as those where caregivers took time to understand them, accepted them as part of the family, and did not expect immediate trust or compliance. They also described negative experiences when caregivers were dismissive, quick to anger, or treated youth differently than biological children.

> "When you bring these kids into your home, you're building a home for them. You're giving them a home and a family, the whole experience."

Recommendation: Recruitment efforts should emphasize the relational aspects of fostering youth and help prospective families understand that building trust takes time.

Support youth's lives beyond the home. Youth frequently described the positive impact of families who supported school, employment, extracurricular activities, friendships, and future goals. Participants often linked family preparedness to opportunities, confidence, social connections, and long-term success. They also described restrictions on activities and relationships as limiting and, at times, isolating.

"If they're prepared for you and know what you're into, they'll get you involved in those activities and it will help you find what you want."

Recommendation: Recruitment efforts should emphasize the important role families play in helping youth participate in activities, maintain relationships, and prepare for adulthood.

Recognize that every youth is different. Youth repeatedly pushed back against public perceptions about youth in foster care and emphasized that young people have different needs, strengths, interests, goals, and life experiences. Participants also challenged common misconceptions that youth in foster care are "bad," "too far gone," or unable to succeed.

"Instead of looking at the youth's background, look at who they are now."
"The only person who can teach you about themselves is that person."

Recommendation: Recruitment efforts should emphasize that there is no single foster care experience and encourage families to get to know each youth as an individual.

Promote belonging, acceptance, and equitable treatment. Youth consistently emphasized wanting to feel welcomed, included, and treated as a valued member of the family. Participants described negative experiences when youth in foster care were treated differently than biological children, excluded from family life, or made to feel unwanted. Several also highlighted the importance of respecting youths' cultural, racial, religious, and personal identities.

"If families brought them in with open arms, rather than looking at them like, 'Oh, we have to have you here.' Make you feel like you are wanted there."

Recommendation: Recruitment efforts should emphasize helping youth feel accepted, respected, and like a genuine part of the family.

Recruit families who understand the realities of fostering youth. Youth stressed that caring for youth requires understanding adolescent development, mental health needs, increasing independence, and the unique experiences youth may bring into care. Participants noted that youth often require different support than younger children and that families should enter fostering with realistic expectations.

"While there are challenges with taking in an older youth, there are also rewarding aspects of taking in a teen and getting to bond with the teen."

Recommendation: Recruitment efforts should communicate both the challenges and rewards of fostering youth so prospective families are better prepared for the experience.

Appendix : Focus Group Questions

Question	*What are we trying to get out of these questions?*
1. To begin, we are going to talk about families that are prepared to have a teenager in their home. In general, what does a prepared family mean to you?	This opening question helps ground the discussion by prompting youth to define what a prepared family looks like in their own terms. It creates a shared starting point for the group and orients their later responses toward concrete expectations of preparation.
2a. Now, instead of speaking in general, think about a specific family you lived with as a teen or older youth. How would you describe the family's level of preparedness? What did they do or say that showed this? 2b. For those of you who have been placed in kinship care with relatives, how prepared were they to have a teen in the home?	These questions move from general ideas to lived experience by asking youth to reflect on families they have lived with. For those in kinship care, a brief comparison to other placements may be explored if relevant.
3. In what ways did a family's preparedness impact your day-to-day life beyond the home, like school, friends, or activities? Please share some examples if you can.	This question broadens the focus beyond the home, exploring how a family's level of preparedness affects other parts of life such as school, friendships, and activities. It is also getting at consequences of family preparedness so we can understand how this matters for older youth.
4. What should be included in training to make sure a new resource parent is prepared to support teens and older youth?	This question focuses on what training content is most important to prepare families to support teens and older youth, based on youth perspectives and experiences.

5. Now imagine you are on a committee trying to recruit families for teens in foster care. We are going to ask a few questions about who to recruit, how to reach them, and what to share with them. 5a. Based on what you've shared, what kinds of families would you want to reach? 5b. Where or how would you reach the families you are trying to recruit? 5c. What would you want the families to understand about welcoming a teen into their home?	This question builds on earlier discussion by asking youth to apply what they have already shared about prepared families to recruitment. Encourage them to think about which families to focus on and what characteristics matter most.
6. Finally, what is one piece of advice you'd give to adults thinking about fostering or adopting a teen?	This question helps capture key takeaways in youth voice.