



# Guide *for* Media

*Ten Recommendations for  
Journalists Interviewing Young  
People from Foster Care*

advice for from the national network for young people in foster care



**FosterClub**

the national network for young people in foster care | [www.fosterclub.org](http://www.fosterclub.org)

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# FosterClub Media Guide

## 10 Recommendations for Journalists Interviewing Young People from Foster Care

Many positive outcomes can result when the personal experiences and stories of young people in foster care are revealed to the community. Public awareness of this often forgotten young population is raised. Shortcomings in the foster care system are exposed. Public will for improving care for abused and neglected children is created.

But the collection and publication of their compelling personal stories can also leave foster youth vulnerable and sometimes dangerously exposed. The overriding concern of adults in society must always be the best interests of vulnerable youth. This often fragile population in the state's care must be interviewed and sensitive personal information published with utmost care.

FosterClub, the national network and advocate for young people in foster care, urges news professionals to take the following precautions when interviewing young people from foster care:

### **1. Select Youth Who Have Been Prepped to Work with Media**

Whenever possible, elect to interview youth in your story who have received training in speaking with the media. Generally, these youth should be equipped with an understanding of how to strategically share their story while protecting confidentiality for themselves and other people who may be a part of their story (younger siblings, caseworkers, etc.). Several organizations provide this type of training for the youth in their organization (a list is provided at the end of this Guide).

“Youth in foster care have already been through so much — if they are going to be put out there to share their stories publicly, it’s important they receive the training and support they need to protect themselves from harm or humiliation while doing it.”

— Lupe Tovar, foster care alumna, Arizona

### **2. Obtain Proper Consent**

If the young person is a minor or still in foster care, consent to be interviewed should be gained from their legal guardian. In most cases, foster parents are not legal guardians and do not have the authority to grant consent. Work with the foster care agency with jurisdiction over the child. They will determine if consent from the court or biological parent needs to be obtained.

Photography of young people in foster care is usually restricted. Consider creative photography that does not compromise the youth's identity.

Remember: Adult or Guardian permission does not absolve journalists of their responsibility to use good judgment and the highest professional ethics.

### **3. Ensure Youth's Safety**

A youth in care may be in danger from a past abuser. Identifying the youth's home, neighborhood, school, or church could compromise their safety.

In a small community (or one with a fairly small population of kids in foster care), details about a young person could make him easily identifiable. In semi-anonymous quotes obtained from foster youth, consider using a pseudonym and/or enlarging the geographic identifier in the tag line ("Johnny from Columbia County" or "Foster youth, age 13, Salem area").

Be advised that disclosure of confidential information could jeopardize the youth's place to live (a foster family may not allow a child to live with them if a dangerous past abuser learns of their whereabouts), which in turn could result in a difficult out of area move to a new school, loss of contact with siblings or friends, loss of a church or sports team support, etc.

### **4. Consider Repercussions for the Youth**

Consequences of the foster youth's comments, both short-term and long-term, must be considered. Point out to youth and their guardians that what they are about to say may impact their life at school, biological parents, siblings, and other relationships.

Emphasize that the young person can choose not to answer a question or ask you not to use sensitive information.

"In agreeing to an interview with Time Magazine, I knew I had to consider how the things I would say could impact my family members. But I also had to consider how sharing personal information about my life could impact my relationships with friends, colleagues, even people who didn't know me very well. It bothers me when I see interviews with youth and it is apparent that no one helped them think through what they would say publicly."

— Daniel Knapp, foster care alumnus, New York

### **5. Inform the Youth Being Interviewed about the Scope and Scale of the Media You Represent**

Does the young person understand the format of the publication?  
Do they understand the distribution and audience it will reach?  
Are they aware of the longevity of the publication?  
Are the youth in foster care told what will be done with what they say?  
Are they permitted to see the finished product?  
Have you explained that everything they say will not be in the story or that their contribution may not run at all?

### **6. Be Aware of Boundary Issues**

Children may try to please you and may say what they think you want to hear rather than answer honestly. Be sure to stress that the young person is the expert on their own life and emphasize the importance of accurate information. Reflect back what a young person is telling you and provide an opportunity to correct errors.

Young people in care have often shared intimate parts of their stories with therapists and child welfare professionals. They may lack the sophistication to understand the difference in answering probing personal questions that a journalist may ask. Do not provoke the young person to expose inappropriate or hurtful personal details.

Don't use information that would embarrass or damage a child, even with their permission. A young person may tell you just about anything about themselves, from bedwetting problems to drug use. It does not mean that you need to use every titillating detail, particularly if it is not central to the story.

*"Sometimes when a reporter would ask me overly personal questions, I would feel the need to be compliant... it's what I had learned to do while in foster care. I would recommend that reporters pay close attention to youth while interviewing them. If they seem extremely uncomfortable... give them the option to opt out. Assuring them it's ok to share only what they are comfortable with sharing."  
— Nicole Dobbins, foster care alumna, Oregon*

## **7. Confirm Youth's Resources for Following-up**

Make arrangements to ensure that a young person is protected after publication, and that support systems are in place should other children contact the publisher in a reach out for help. Most youth in foster care have suffered traumatic experiences. Those experiences may be stirred up through an interview. In some cases, it may be weeks or months after an interview that the youth suffers as a result of an interview. Or remorse or shame may overtake the youth upon the interview's publication.

Prior to interviewing young people, care should be taken to ensure they have a resource person or agency that will help them deal with any repercussions resulting from your interview.

## **8. Manage Post-Interview Expectations**

Young people in foster care, due to their experiences, often have attachment issues. The fact that an interviewer takes interest in their story may be misinterpreted by the youth that a stronger commitment by the adult is intended. Make it clear before the interview starts that you are doing a job. Take care not to act just like a friend. Explain to the young person that the relationship will not continue past the end of the interview.

## **9. Don't Perpetuate the Stigma**

The stigma surrounding living in foster care is difficult for many young people to overcome. Much of the public feels that youth did something to get put into foster care and therefore deserves not to be surrounded by their original loving family. Many consider children in the state's care to be second-class citizens. These perceptions are, of course, totally untrue, and need to be corrected. As a news professional, you have the power.

If your story focuses on the challenges associated with the foster care system, be sure to avoid placing blame on the youth themselves. For example, instead of simply stating that youth transitioning from foster care often become homeless, focus your story on reasons for the high rate of homelessness among former foster youth,

including a lack of preparation, unreasonable expectations that 18-year-olds are suddenly self sufficient with no parental support or negative parental support, or the lack of resources provided to youth leaving care (including long waiting lists for low-income housing, for which youth can not apply while still a minor in the system).

Don't ask questions that imply blame, such as "Didn't you know you were supposed to be going to school?" or "Why didn't you tell someone about the abuse sooner?". Questions such as these lead a child to feel guilt for a situation no child deserves and may expose them to grave humiliation.

"I was once asked by an interviewer, 'What type of trouble did you get in? I ask because it seems like foster kids are always in trouble.' I knew at that moment that I should be worried about how I was going to be portrayed in the piece. The interviewer obviously hadn't done his homework about why kids go into foster care."

— Aaron Weaver, foster care alumnus, Nebraska

## 10. Keep Your Eye on the Bottom Line

Treat young people in foster care like you would want a reporter to treat your own children. Remember, these young people often do not have a parental figure looking out for their best interest. To the extent possible, educate and hold accountable your colleagues covering child welfare stories in the media. Keep in mind that even a tragic incident involving the child welfare system may be an opportunity to garner public support for improving life of kids in foster care.

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## Finding Young People for Stories

There are many organizations that work with young people in foster care and are able to provide the training and support outlined in this Guide for youth who choose to interact with the media. If you have a story that might benefit from the infusion of a foster youth's perspective and would like assistance in identifying a young person, consider working in partnership with one of these national or regional organizations:

FosterClub. [www.fosterclub.org](http://www.fosterclub.org). 503-717-1552

Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. [www.jimcaseyyouth.org](http://www.jimcaseyyouth.org)

Orphan Foundation of America, [www.orphan.org](http://www.orphan.org)

National Foster Youth Advisory Council, [www.nfyac.org](http://www.nfyac.org)

California Youth Connection, [www.calyouthconn.org](http://www.calyouthconn.org)

Youth Communications, [www.youthcomm.org](http://www.youthcomm.org)

Quotations from young people in foster care concerning a wide range of topics may be found at [www.fosterclub.com](http://www.fosterclub.com) and used in publications with permission and proper citation.

If your organization works with youth in foster care and is interested in training youth and staff in working with media, please contact FosterClub at 503-717-1552.

## **Resources and Further Reading**

Children and the Media, Unicef. Retrieved from  
<http://www.unicef.org/magic/briefing/childmedia.html>

Covering Children & Trauma  
Dart Center. Retrieved from  
[http://www.dartcenter.org/media/covering\\_children\\_web.pdf](http://www.dartcenter.org/media/covering_children_web.pdf)

Columbia Journalism Review  
Using Children as Sources, Elizabeth Stone, 1999. Retrieved from  
<http://archives.cjr.org/year/99/5/children.asp>

Casey Journalism Center of Children and Families  
[www.cjc.umd.edu](http://www.cjc.umd.edu)

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## **About FosterClub**

FosterClub is the national network for young people in foster care. For more than 513,000 children living in the foster care system across the country, childhood has been interrupted by abuse, neglect or abandonment. FosterClub is their club — a place to turn for advice, support, information, and hope.

FosterClub is about providing a voice for youth within the system that so heavily impacts their lives. Whether advocating on their own behalf, in concern for siblings or family members, or speaking out on behalf of their peers currently in the system, FosterClub's websites, publications and events provide a youth-friendly network that helps young people be heard.

Our members are resilient youth and young adults determined to build a better future for themselves and for other kids coming up through the system behind them. Learn more about FosterClub or how you can support young people in foster care at [www.fosterclub.org](http://www.fosterclub.org) or by calling 503-717-1552.