

YOUTH VOICES:

LIFE AFTER FOSTER CARE

Facilitation guide



DAVE THOMAS
FOUNDATION
FOR ADOPTION®

davethomasfoundation.org
1-800-ASK-DTFA

How can **YOU** help change a child's future?

- Assure that every child has the goal of a family, either through reunification or adoption.
- Involve youth in their case plan and recruitment.
- Understand what is behind a youth's opposition to adoption. Help them address their fears.
- Be invested in the life of the child. Feel the *urgency* that time is running out on their childhood.
- Share your belief that unadoptable is unacceptable.
- Implement evidence-based child-focused adoption recruitment in partnership with us. Contact us, or visit davethomasfoundation.org to learn more.

Remember, children heal in families.

DO YOU IMPACT THE LIFE OF A YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE?

If you are a **child welfare worker, foster parent, adoptive parent, therapist, judge, governor, human services administrator, CASA or guardian ad litem**, please take six minutes to watch this powerful video. Five former foster youth share their unscripted thoughts, experiences, feelings and fears. Some were adopted, some aged out of care. They address their apprehension and joys about adoption, share the consequences of aging out, and stress the need for family, regardless of age.

WE ARE ALL RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT HAPPENS TO YOUTH WHO AGE OUT OF FOSTER CARE.

Statistics show youth who age out of foster care are much more likely to become homeless, unemployed, undereducated, early parents and incarcerated. **Children formerly in foster care are twice as likely to suffer Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as returning U.S. war veterans.**¹ Financially, the cost to society for these negative outcomes cost nearly \$8 billion for each annual cohort of youth leaving care.²

CHILDREN HEAL IN FAMILIES.

Victims of child abuse and neglect need permanent homes to thrive. They deserve the stability, support and unconditional love that family provides. The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption's Wendy's Wonderful Kids child-focused adoption recruitment program has proven that **every child is adoptable**. A family for every child *is* possible.³

¹ Pecora, P.J., Kessler, R.C., Williams, J., O'Brien, K., Downs, A.C., English, D., White, J., Hiripi, E., White, C.R., Wiggins, T., and Holmes, K. (2005). Improving family foster care: Findings from the Northwest foster care alumni study. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs.

² Jim Casey Youth Opportunities (2013). *Cost Avoidance: The Business Case for Investing In Youth Aging Out of Foster Care*. St. Louis, MO.

³ Malm, K., Vandivere, S., Allen, T., DeVooght, K., Ellis, R., McKlindon, A., Smollar, J., Williams, E., & Zinn, A. (2011). *Evaluation Report Summary: The Wendy's Wonderful Kids Initiative*. Child Trends, Washington: DC.

USING THIS VIDEO WITH YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

The longer version of this video is designed to help workers engage youth in the conversation about permanence. Below are suggestions for your consideration.

Preview the video for yourself. Consider whether the 6-minute version or 44-minute version will best suit your audience.

Prepare to share with youth:

- Anticipate the potential behavioral or emotional response the youth may have to the video. Be respectful of any feelings of fear of change, or loyalty to birth family. Let the child's team know you are using this tool in advance (for example, caregiver, other workers, and therapist). Be aware of your agency's policies and procedures about new disclosures of abuse or neglect.
- Show the video to youth individually or in a group, preferably with an adult who is prepared to address responses. If you are using the longer version, you may choose to watch one youth segment at a time.
- Observe the viewer. You may want to stop the video to solicit feedback along the way. Youth may not share much during the initial viewing, and instead the video might prompt several conversations over a period of time.
- Think about how you can use this opportunity to explain the importance of permanency and the adoption process. Many youth do not understand that adoption is a gradual, step-by-step experience in which they can play a deciding role.
- Consider how you can use the video as a prompt to help the youth to help identify adults with whom they might like to reconnect, and who might become adoptive resources.

General questions you might ask during or after viewing:

- Do you relate to any of the youth in the video? How or why?
- What advice would you have given any of the youth in the video when they were deciding whether to say "yes" or "no" to adoption?
- Do you have any questions you wish you could ask any of the youth in the video? (Please pass these on to us at info@davethomasfoundation.org.)

Discussion prompts are on the following pages.

After viewing:

- You may want to **remove this booklet** and offer the youth the DVD to take home with them.
- Follow up with the youth a few days later. Ask if they have any more questions or thoughts to share.

To order more DVDs free of charge, or access the videos and guide online, visit www.davethomasfoundation.org. We welcome your feedback and suggestions at info@davethomasfoundation.org.



JOIN THE CONVERSATION using
#lifeafterfostercare

DISCUSSION PROMPTS FOR ALL AUDIENCES



JULIUS

Julius talked about learning to trust again after a failed adoption. How did he learn to let his guard down? What things did Julius' adoptive family do to create closeness, attachment and trust with him? In what ways do you think Julius' second adoptive family was different from his first?

"If I got adopted, would I stay in this family? I'm putting my heart out there, don't stomp on it. I had to learn to trust again, and that was really hard. I didn't know what love really felt like."

Julius made the choice to change his last name. Writing his name as "Julius Kissinger" was a big moment for him. Why?

"What I looked forward to the most, was writing my new name."

I already felt part of the family... like I was their son."

Julius thought he was too old to be adopted. What was likely to happen to Julius if he hadn't been adopted the second time?

"I was scared because of my age. Rumor had it the older you get, the less likely you are to be adopted by a family."

Julius says his family is the perfect family. Why?

"The family I have now is perfect. For a while, I was looking for the perfect family, and there's no such thing as a perfect family. Every family has its issues. For me, this feels perfect, because I have a mom and a dad. That's what I've always dreamed of – having a mom and a dad who would be able to love me."



AMANDA

Amanda expressed uncertainty about adoption. What were her fears?

"At first I was scared of being adopted. But I wanted a family. I was nervous when I first came down here. I didn't think that everything would be good. I didn't think I could have a good family. But I was wrong."

Amanda did not want to age out of care. What is her perception of it? Why would kids want this? Why would social workers propose this?

"Aging out – I know some kids want to do that. They think it's the better way to go. Pretty much, you're just being thrown out with nothing."

Amanda says her caseworker gave her hope. Why is this so important?

"The reason why I want to become a social worker is because of my caseworker. I lost hope. And when I found her, she gave me hope, lots and lots of hope."

Amanda doesn't always agree with her adoptive parents. How do you think she and her parents work through this?

"They're really nice and they take care of me. I know some of the decisions they make, I don't agree with, or it makes me angry. But sooner or later I find out it's because they care about me and they didn't want me to get hurt."



ADRIAN

Adrian moved often in foster care. How does he describe this experience? How do you think it impacted his self-esteem?

"I bounced between foster care and my mom, back and forth, like I was some kind of throw away item. And that's very tough to deal with, even at this age. I moved between foster home and biological parents my whole life. If you look at the average, I moved every six months. It appeared to me every time I got close to a parental figure, they were taken away. You start to look internally. What is it about me that makes me unadoptable?"

Adrian had mixed feelings about aging out. What was his experience when he left care and went to college?

"On one hand, I was excited to be aging out. On the other hand I was terrified. Other kids moved

into college with their parents. It was just me moving in with caseworkers and a county van. My roommate could go home on the weekend. His mom called and checked on him. It was extremely depressing."

Adrian describes the challenges of not having a family. What did he say makes it hard? What role would a family fill in his life?

"What happens when you're having a bad day, having bills, surviving out here on your own, paying rent, paying for car insurance, finding a job? Foster care makes you so dependent on caseworkers, and then when you get out on your own, they require that you do it yourself, and you really don't know how. It's little events that remind you that you don't have parents. There is nothing like having someone to call at the end of the day."



NANCY

Nancy might have had difficulty emancipating from foster care. What was the plan for her future?

"The plan was I would stay with my foster mom until I was 21, and then I would move to a group home. And I didn't want that."

Nancy said she tested her adoptive parents. Why do you think she acted out, and why did she stop?

"When I moved here, I was very testy, because I had moved from seven or eight foster homes before. I would get upset, and they would move me, because of my tantrums. I feared that it might not work out. I tested mom and dad to see if I was

really going to get adopted. I finally realized that, hey, these people don't move me like everyone else. I need to stop throwing fits."

Nancy talks a lot about being happy that she was adopted. What advice does she have for youth who have fears about adoption?

"Some children in foster care are afraid to be adopted because they don't know what's going to happen to them or what's expected of them. Don't be afraid to get adopted, because if you get adopted, you'll have a family to go to for Christmases and birthdays. You'll get a forever home."



RENEE

Renee said she was opposed to adoption. How does she feel now about the decisions she made at that time?

"I was not adopted because I was afraid. At the time they were talking to me about adoption, I was completely against it. I was scared to go with someone I didn't know. What I didn't realize is I would want it in the long run. If you find somebody to love you, why not take advantage of that opportunity?"

One reason Renee was opposed to adoption was because she wanted to be loyal to her brother. How do you think the adults in Renee's life could have helped maintain their relationship?

"My brother was in foster care as well. He said 'you are not leaving me, we are in this together.'"

Renee describes the consequences of aging out. What does she say she misses most by not having a family?

"If I had parents that actually belonged to me, or I belonged to them, they would have guided me. There were many times I just wanted someone to call, somewhere to go home to. Graduation from college was the saddest, most hard day in the world. All of the people I expected to come did not come. I wasn't surprised, just sad."

Renee says there is a difference between a long-term foster placement and a permanent home. What does this message mean for youth? For caseworkers? For courts?

"Just because you're in the same place for a long time doesn't mean that's stability. That just means you're in the same place. Location is not stability."

CREDITS

We extend our deepest, most heartfelt appreciation to the featured youth – Julius, Amanda, Adrian, Nancy and Renee – for their bravery and eloquence in sharing their stories. Also special thanks to child welfare consultant Denise Goodman, and to our child-focused recruiters, for their input in the development of this guide.



DAVE THOMAS
FOUNDATION
FOR ADOPTION®

davethomasfoundation.org
1-800-ASK-DTFA



JOIN THE CONVERSATION using #lifeafterfostercare