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YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD



**DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE FREEDOMS
AND NORMALCY RECOMMENDATIONS**



The Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board (YAB) is comprised of current and former substitute care youth ages 16-21. Youth leaders on the YAB educate, advocate, and form partnerships to create positive change in the substitute care system.

The Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board (YAB) focused on a project that aims to bring attention to the inconsistency of rules and policies regarding developmentally appropriate freedoms and normalcy for youth in care. The YAB adapted and modernized the recommendations made in the *Youth Developed IL Practice Standards* from 2006. The hope for this project is that the recommendations might be used in conjunction with older youth resources already in existence, like *The Teen Success Agreement* and *The Know Your Rights Manual*. The goal of these recommendations is that youth in care have more opportunities to feel normal, well-adjusted and stable during their time in the system. Feedback from the 2015 Older Youth Retreat focus group sessions has also been incorporated into this document. There were 89 youth present from 32 counties, and their feedback is included throughout this guide.

“Normalcy is important to me because I believe that every child has a right to be happy and treated as if we were part of a family.”

- Youth in care

“Normalcy is being safe, healthy and having friends and family in your life. Kids in care should have normalcy because it will help them live life without thinking something is wrong with them.”

- Youth in care

The YAB hopes that these recommendations will be a timely resource and addition to federal H.R. 4980/P.L. 113-183: Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act implementation in Pennsylvania, which was signed into public law on September 29th, 2014. In addition to H.R. 4980/P.L. 113-183, Pennsylvania has passed Act 75: The Activities and Experiences for Children in Out-of-Home Placement. A few of the many requirements of H.R. 4980/P.L. 113-183 and Act 75 include: increasing older youth services, opportunities for normalcy, and building a youth’s support network. H.R. 4980/P.L. 113-183 has provisions for developmentally appropriate freedoms and defines “Age or Developmentally Appropriate Freedoms” with the following: “(i) activities or items that are generally accepted as suitable for children of the same chronological age or level of maturity or that are determined to be developmentally appropriate for a child, based on the development of cognitive, emotional, physical,

and behavioral capacities that are typical for an age or age group; and “(ii) in the case of a specific child, activities or items that are suitable for the child based on the developmental stages attained by the child with respect to the cognitive, emotional, physical, and behavioral capacities of the child.”

Developmentally appropriate freedoms (DAF) are important to older youth in the child welfare system. They aid in the process of guiding a youth in foster care toward a happy, healthy adult life. Here are some other reasons why participating in these activities benefit youth:

- It helps them feel normal and builds their identity.
- It builds their self-esteem and can help them cope with stress.
- It prepares them for adulthood by giving them access to safe experiences and decision making.
- It increases interactions with friends and connects them to a more natural support system.
- These experiences can help youth heal from trauma experienced in life.

“I don’t think that this should be called a normalcy plan. I wouldn’t feel normal if I had to write down everything that I did. This isn’t what a normal kid has to do.”
- Youth in care

YAB members and participants of the retreat focus group sessions felt that planning would highlight some of the areas youth struggle with in regards to freedoms and normalcy. However, there are underlying practices needed to make the discussion about normalcy a safe space for youth to express their needs. Youth expressed that they did not have access to formal and informal grievance processes, and some had experiences where grievances they filled out were thrown out or never addressed. Many youth had wished they were given a list of their rights, and were very disappointed that they hadn’t received them when they needed to make decisions or advocate for themselves. Youth were hesitant in having a “normalcy plan” that creates another space that lacks efficient engagement, communication and follow through.

WHAT ARE WE ASKING FOR?

The YAB believes that a stronger emphasis on relationship building and strong communication with youth could create an environment where youth feel safe to express their needs and build upon their permanent connections. Youth would then be comfortable enough to request assistance when they needed it, and to participate in the opportunity to re-enter care. The following are recommendations the YAB would like to address in regards to developmentally appropriate freedoms and normalcy in foster and substitute care.

“We’re doing what we can to cope with situations that we can. But some situations are extreme.”
- Youth in care

*The recommendations that are currently required under P.L. 113-183 and PA Act 75 are included with an *. For more information links to these two laws are included in the Resource Section of these Recommendations.

The Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board would like:

- **Youth should have support in order to access social and school activities that promote healthy physical and emotional lifestyles.*** This would include all placement settings, including congregate care. Agency policies should be put into place to remove frequent barriers such as approval process, transportation, and funding to ensure youth participation in these activities.
- **In addition to what is already required under the Children in Foster Care Act, youth should have access to a “know your rights” training.*** The YAB would like ongoing monitoring of agency’s grievance policies to ensure youth are updated and informed about the status of their filed grievances.
- **Youth should have access to an objective mediator who can support them when there are disagreements with caregivers and staff.*** An open dialogue should be encouraged between youth and their current or prospective caregiver. While not every decision may be in the hands of the youth, communication is important in the development of healthy relationships. Even if a decision must be made without the youth, or contrary to the will of the youth, the reasons behind that decision can be explained to them.
- **Implementing the use of the Teen Success Agreement (TSA) as a living document.** The TSA is a “youth developed” guide and agreement for older youth, caregivers, and social workers that helps facilitate a discussion about age appropriate activities and opportunities for youth. The YAB recommends incorporating the TSA in permanency planning, and encourages that it be discussed at permanency review hearings. YAB also recommends utilizing the document with every new placement for youth. The Teen Success Agreement has youth developed practices to address their concerns in a way that helps a youth feel normal and supported as they transition to adulthood.
- **Youth’s privacy should be protected, and humiliation should not be used as a method of punishment.** Ensuring a youth’s information is confidential and only shared when necessary will go a long way in helping them feel normal and adjusted. Sharing personal information and using forms of punishment that humiliate a youth often do more harm than good.

- **Preplacement visits are best practice and vital to the success of a youth's placement.** Youth would like more opportunities to visit the homes of prospective caregivers. This helps build relationships and supports effective communication. Preplacement visits allow youth to share information about themselves and what makes them feel comfortable. It also provides an opportunity for youth to clarify information in their case file.
- **Resource parents and placement staff should be trained and supported in providing developmentally appropriate freedoms to youth in their care. This is crucial to the success of youth transitioning to adulthood.*** Agency policies and monitoring should be put into place to ensure youth have the optimum level of freedoms and or responsibilities in accordance with their level of development and dependability.
- **Relationships with family members and siblings should remain intact.** Maintaining contact with family and permanent connections is important to a youth's well-being. Siblings should have visits regularly when they are not placed together. Distance and funding are not valid reasons to keep siblings apart. Agency policies and monitoring should be put into place to ensure siblings have regular visits in addition to maintaining contact with each other. Additionally, whenever possible, youth should be made aware of their sibling's progress and how they might be able to support them.

"My foster mom would call my boss at McDonald's and tell them about my punishment. This could affect my reputation and ability to get jobs in the future."

- Youth in care

WHY ARE WE ASKING FOR DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE FREEDOMS?

It is important for anyone to participate in activities that offer exercise, self-expression, connections to peers and supportive adults, and safe spaces to learn and grow. Youth in foster care especially need these activities to feel adjusted, free from the burdens of their circumstances, and to build permanent connections. These activities help youth feel normal, and are positive venues for youth to cope and deal with stress. Exercise and participation in sports helps a youth's physical health and builds self-esteem. Self-expression, such as art, music, dance and singing also help with self-esteem and awareness building. These normal activities prepare a youth for adulthood because they teach about team building, following through on commitments, working hard towards goals and naturally connect youth to supportive adults, coaches and counselors.

"I would like to go to Kennywood {theme park}, fun adventure things and family trips without paperwork. I have six sisters; I want to be able to go on a family trip without there being a lot of paperwork, because we live in separate placements."

- Youth in care

SPECIAL POPULATIONS

The YAB believes that Developmentally Appropriate Freedoms (normalcy) plays an even bigger part for youth in congregate care. It is important that the recommendations outlined in this document still apply to youth in these settings. While the youth's past behavior and circumstances may have justified them being placed in congregate care, their behavior should not warrant a complete lack of involvement in the decision-making process. If a youth is in a setting where social contact is limited, considerations should be made for what measures will be taken to replace that absence of freedom. The outcomes for youth who remain in these settings and are not allowed to develop normally/naturally are known to be extremely negative.

"I wrestled my whole life and was not allowed when I went into care. Because I was "troubled." Taking things away does not help you, those things relieve your anger."

- Youth in care

*Both H.R. 4980/P.L. 113-183 and PA Act 75 include all placement types in their legal requirements for developmentally appropriate freedoms and normalcy.

CONCLUSION

Through the course of a year and over many conversations, the YAB began to understand that there are many factors which come into play when decisions must be made on what a youth is or is not permitted to do. From the developmental stage of the individual, to past actions and environments, to liability considerations for the county and placement provider, enabling a youth to live a life that looks anything like their 'norm' can be tricky. However, under H.R. 4980/P.L. 113-183 and PA Act 75, developmentally appropriate freedoms must be ensured for youth in out-of-home placement, no matter where they are placed in order to maintain stability and help them feel connected to their personal identity. The recommendations outlined above can be used to empower and enable a youth rather than overwhelm them with more restrictions. It is important that there is an understanding of where a youth is in their ability to make decisions and interact with caregivers. This can give a great deal of insight into what would be appropriate for the youth to remain safe in their community and continue to develop in a positive way.

“When I was in my group home, I was allowed to have a job. That was my first job, and it was an excellent experience for me.”

- Youth in care

“Youth that are in residential should have the same rights as others, [I] can’t even go to a birthday party but [I] don’t understand why.” - Youth in care

The Youth Advisory Board would like the conversation about developmentally appropriate freedoms to continue, and is excited to work with counties and providers on developing consistent guidelines that support youth. The implementation of H.R. 4980/P.L. 113-183 and PA Act 75 provides a great opportunity to explore the recommendations the YAB has outlined throughout this document, as many of the recommendations are relevant and provide youth access to developmentally appropriate freedoms. It is our belief that enacting these recommendations will provide stability and a place for youth to grow into healthy and adjusted adults. Our members are available for workgroups, panel presentations, and any other activity that may support your work towards normalcy. If you would like to request the assistance of The Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board, please contact the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center.



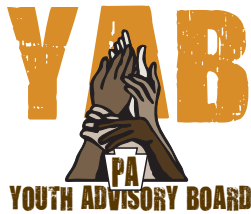
TOP TEN TIPS FOR RESOURCE PARENTS OF TEENAGERS

The purpose of the Top Ten List is to help engage foster parents and youth in conversation about realistic roles, responsibilities, and expectations to increase positive connections within the household. This list was developed by youth from the North East Regional Youth Advisory Board.

- 1. To be a part of the family** - Youth want to be viewed as part of the family and not an outsider.
- 2. Social Life** – Youth would like to have the opportunity to engage in social activities.
- 3. Open Communication** – Youth should have the opportunity to express concerns and discuss problems and emotions without the threat of retaliation.
- 4. Self-responsibility** – Youth should experience self-responsibility such as cooking, laundry and household chores in order to learn home management before they go out on their own.
- 5. Transportation** – Youth would like additional assistance with transportation involving employment and school activities.
- 6. Cultural Diversity** – Youth and caregivers should respect each other’s cultural, ethnic, and gender diversity.
- 7. Support** – Support Youth in achieving goals and engaging personal interests.
- 8. Mutual Respect** – Treat each other with respect and fairness.
- 9. Relationships** – Promote and encourage interactions with biological family and permanent connections.
- 10. Confidentiality** – Youth and foster parents should have a safe and confidential relationship.



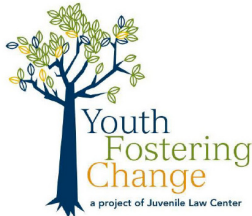
RESOURCE PAGE FOR DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE FREEDOMS



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YOUTH THRIVE

To learn more about the Center for the Study of Social Policy or about their Youth Thrive Framework you can find their website here: <http://www.cssp.org/reform/child-welfare/youth-thrive>



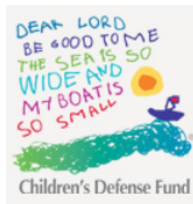
Youth Fostering Change's Teen Success Agreement and Education Resource Guide can be found at: <http://www.jlc.org/yfc>

Know Your Rights

The Know Your Rights Manual can be found at: <http://www.independentlivingpa.org/rights.htm>



Foster Club's very youth friendly Transition Toolkit can be found at: https://www.fosterclub.com/files/transition_toolkit.pdf

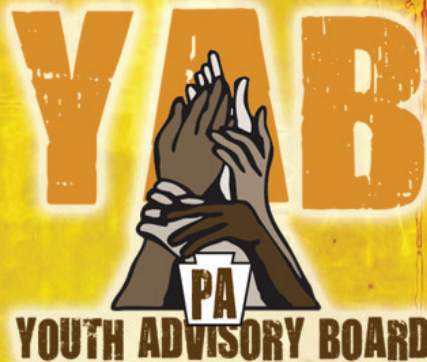


Children's Defense Fund's summary of H.R. 4980/P.L. 113-183 "Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act" can be found at: <http://www.childrensdefense.org/library/data/fact-sheet-on-hr-4980.pdf>



Federal P.L 113-183 "The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act" <https://goo.gl/Uk3I9w>

Pennsylvania Act 75 "The Activities and Experiences of Children in Out of Home Placement Act" <http://goo.gl/4Jx0WU>



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Pennsylvania
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