

Therapists and Social Workers: Lessons You Can Use With Teens

This issue of *Represent* focuses on constructive ways youth advocate for their wants and needs, then looks at how those skills can translate into advocating for others and becoming engaged citizens. You can use these stories to help teens reflect on problem-solving skills and identify ways of applying those skills more broadly.

Advocacy Template

“Learn to Advocate” by Sabrina Hines (p. 7) lays out a clear template for how to identify a problem and to figure out how to advocate for a solution.

1. Ask your teens to identify a problem they’ve encountered in foster care. Call on volunteers to share their problems with the group and list responses on the board.
2. Introduce Sabrina’s story by telling your teens that this story will help them think about good strategies for solving these kinds of problems in the system.
3. After reading the story, return to your teens’ list and choose one problem to work through together, using Sabrina’s steps. Then, ask teens to use the same process to devise a plan for solving their problem. Finally, ask volunteers to share their plans with the group.

Using the Template

1. Read Imani Brammer’s story, “Keeping My Cool” (p. 4). In this story, Imani finds out she’s going to be moved to a new foster home, putting her further away from her friends and family and forcing her to change schools. At first, she has a meltdown at her foster care agency. Then, she reflects on the situation and advocates for herself by calling her lawyer. By communicating constructively with adults and working with her lawyer, Imani is able to remain in her foster home. Ask your teens if they agree with Imani’s conclusion that having a meltdown is not an effective form of advocacy. (Although it no doubt got her staff’s attention, it could have led to serious consequences, like jail or ending up in a more restrictive environment). Ask them if they’ve ever lost their temper in a similar situation, and what would have been a smarter way to handle their frustration.
2. Imani was lucky in being able to reach her lawyer instantly. Many times, it takes persistence—

repeated phone calls, e-mails, and in-person visits to get things done. Read “I Need a Winter Coat!” by Alisha Anderson (p. 12). In this story, Alisha is having trouble getting her seasonal clothing allowance from her agency. She shuttles between her social worker and other agency staff, who each tell her that the clothing allocation is someone else’s job. Alisha notes that it can be hard to figure out who at the agency is responsible for what. Like Sabrina’s story, Alisha’s story illustrates that it’s important to know agency policy and rules, and to be persistent in asking for help.

3. Alisha’s story also shows that even the most outspoken teens hesitate when confronted with a room full of adults; when Alisha finally has the opportunity to address her need with her entire team at the agency, she feels timid because all the adults seem to be in a hurry. Ask your teens if they’ve ever felt that way when advocating for themselves. What could they do to overcome that feeling and assert their needs? You may wish to refer to the Foster Care Bill of Rights (p. 16) and read Dr. John DiLallo’s tips for how to overcome feelings of doubt when speaking up for your needs.

Beyond Self-Advocacy

The second part of the magazine looks at how teens can apply their advocacy skills to the wider world. Some teens write about taking on a cause, like politics or raising awareness about their heritage. Others look for opportunities to help other young people in foster care by becoming a mentor (p. 33) or peer advocate (p. 34). And on p. 36 we put the spotlight on an innovative program in Northern Ireland that gives teens a variety of ways to advocate, from calling a hotline to report problems in the home, to being part of home inspections, to learning ways to speak with political leaders and inform policy.

Have the teens read “Having Their Say” (pp. 36-37), paying particular attention to the peer inspection described in the middle of p. 36. Go back to the list the group generated doing the Advocacy Template exercise above. Pick a problem that could be solved by changing policy. Lead the group in discussing how the policy should change. Gently steer the discussion so each teen isn’t just addressing her own problem; point out to them that you all are together writing a regulation that should benefit everyone—in other words, making policy. Congratulate them for moving beyond self-advocacy to system change.