

Supporting Teens Who Have Addicted Parents

A guide for adults working with youth
based on one teen's stories





REAL STORIES
REAL CHANGE

ABOUT US: *Represent*, a quarterly magazine founded in 1993, provides a voice for youth in foster care. Their stories give inspiration and information to peers and offer staff a window into teens' strengths and struggles. *Represent* is published by Youth Communication, a nonprofit organization that helps struggling youth strengthen the social, emotional, and literacy skills that contribute to success in school, work, and life.

SUBSCRIPTIONS:

Get magazine delivered to your program. We offer discounts to bulk subscribers. See Representmag.org

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

Youth Communication provides lessons and professional development, based on real stories by teens, to help adults build positive learning environments and strengthen the social and emotional skills of youth. See youthcomm.org

242 W. 38th St., 6th floor, New York, NY 10018
212-279-0708

Copyright © 2020 by Youth
Communication / New York Center, Inc.



The stories in this guide originally appeared in *Represent* magazine's "Addiction Stole My Parent" issue (Winter 2020).

Table of Contents

03

Introduction

04

Story: Mother to My Mom
Counselor Reflection

08

Story: What Happened After Rehab
Lesson: Taking Care of Me
Self-Care Plan

16

Something You Can't Fix

18

Story: Interventions Helpful and Not
Counselor Reflection



represent!

THE VOICE OF YOUTH IN CARE

Dear Educators and Counselors,

Children of parents with addiction often suffer in silence. One *Represent* writer, K.G., has given us a striking insight into her own experience of a mother struggling with drugs and alcohol.

K.G. used the writing process to open up slowly, much as people do with a therapist or counselor. She wrote "Mother to My Mom" after her mother relapsed, but chose to let the happy ending stand as the truth for several months. Only after we had gained some trust in the editing process, and only after her conversation with her school counselor was she ready to tackle her second story, "What Happened After Rehab."

In the first story, she was all-powerful—she could get drug dealers arrested! She could convince ACS to send her mom to rehab! She could, essentially, heal her mother. In "What Happened After Rehab," she faces the scary truth that her mom's addiction is, for now, stronger than both of them. And that acknowledgment opens the door to her finally telling the truth about her family to someone on the outside—her school counselor. Notable in that story is how the counselor tells K.G. some of what she guesses K.G. is feeling and gently directs her to worry about herself. That is the validation, permission, and direction K.G. needed to hear.

As we worked on these two stories, she included the interventions by ACS and Sheltering Arms, always with an incisive critique of how they did or didn't work and why. I suggested this could be our third story, and that she should think of her audience as people who work with children like her. This gave her genuine power to help others, and she produced "Interventions Helpful and Not."

K.G. can't fix her mom, but she can help readers with her brave honesty and her insight. She has blossomed as a writer and that confidence has extended into other parts of her life. I hope her stories help you help youth like her find their strengths and thrive as well.

Included in this resource are: her stories, a lesson you can use one-on-one with a youth dealing with similar circumstances, and reflection prompts to support you when working with youth like K.G.

Sincerely,

Virginia Vitzthum
Editor, *Represent*



Mother to My Mom

When my mother lost control of her life, I stepped up

BY K.G.

Names have been changed.

When I was little, I would come home from school to find my parents laughing together



over a funny work story. My dad ran his mechanic shop while my mom volunteered at my little sister's school.

While they talked, my sister Evelyn colored another masterpiece for my mom to hang up on the fridge.

When she wasn't working, my mom took Evelyn and me to the park, the beach, or the mov-

ies. She loved cooking and was constantly trying new dishes.

Losing my dad to cancer was a shock, despite every doctor and nurse telling us he wasn't going to make it. My dad had prevailed against their predictions before. Watching him die, with his hand in mine, flattened me. I cried for days.

My mom stopped eating and speaking for weeks, which scared us kids. I had to take care of my sister, even though I was only 12 and Evelyn was 6. Evelyn was distraught and confused at the disintegration of our family. We were on our own in what felt like a dark tunnel with no light at the end.

About two months after my dad died, my mom became more alive in the worst way possible. An aggression had awoken in her. She drove over the speed limit. She'd fight over the smallest things. She swore in front of us kids. Then I saw her buy something in a tiny black-tinted plastic box from our neighbors.

Later I saw my mom pull out the same thin box at the hair salon. She clipped it open and revealed a pill as small as the flashlight lens on my phone.

"What's that?" I pointed.

She threw back the pill with water. "It helps with headaches."

She continued to get more

reckless, until it became clear what I had to do. I wasn't about to stand by and watch my mom become a drug addict just because a supplier lived next door. I told my guidance counselor at middle school about the drug dealers selling to my mom.

SWITCHING ADDICTIONS

The very next morning, a team of heavily armed police with guns raided the house next door. I watched from my window as they escorted the dealers outside and into the police vehicles. "I didn't do anything!" they screamed. I felt

(continued on page 6)



(continued from page 5)

guilt, then fear.

What if my mom finds out I reported them? I agonized. But my paranoia faded away when my mom said, "I think someone caught them selling drugs." I felt relief, then pride that I had prevented my mom from becoming a drug addict. Nobody ever found out I'd told. I felt like I could lead my mom onto the path of healing.

My dad had been our rock, the one to reassure us that everything would be all right. He stuck with that positive attitude even when he was diagnosed with leukemia. My parents fought sometimes, but all would be forgotten the next day.

After he died, my mom's grief went from shutting everyone out to fighting everyone around her. She became like a teenager: She caught attitudes easily and was unkind. Drugs made it worse, and without her supplier, she soon turned to alcohol.

On drugs, she was a monster set loose in the outside world. With alcohol she turned more of her rage on me. She yelled that I didn't understand her and asked why I was still living with her. She was still affectionate with my sister, which felt spiteful when she was being so cruel to me.

I had lost my dad, and now I was losing my mom. The drinking became extreme very quickly. She'd drink until she couldn't stop vomiting, then check herself into the hospital to detox. Reports of so many detoxifications alerted social workers.

"DOES SHE LOVE YOU?"

Our involvement with "the system" started when I sat beside my mom in the hospital bed for the third time in a month.

I looked up from my phone when a woman clutching a small notebook to her chest entered the hospital room. Her smile reached from ear to ear and her pearly white teeth kind of scared me. She seemed like a bottle with too much energy trapped inside.

At first I thought she was a hospital staff member. Then she asked my mom if there was anyone to take me home. She said something about "alcohol" and "children," then an acronym I didn't know, "ACS." Her name was Ms. Taylor.

Then we were having biweekly meetings with her, and my mom was getting blood-tested for alcohol. It was a 60-day investigation that made me feel like a victim rather than a bystander to my mom falling apart.

"Where do you sleep? How do you get disciplined? What do you usually eat?" Ms. Taylor asked during our meetings. She also asked Evelyn and me to pull up our sleeves and pants to check for signs of abuse. My mom had never hit me, but these meetings made me feel fragile and damaged.

One day, Ms. Taylor asked me something I found I couldn't answer right away. "Does your mom love you?" She held her pen over her notebook, ready to write down my answer.

I stared at the ground. When was the last time she told me she loved me? When was the last time I really hugged her? The last time she rained kisses all over my face was when she was sober and my dad was in the room.

I took a deep breath. "I question it sometimes."

A few months later, my mom told me I was invited to a meeting with ACS, the city's Administration for Children's Services. That made me feel like I held an important role in the outcome, even though I was only 15.

Beforehand, my mom reassured me that the meeting would go smoothly. "It's not like we committed murder," she said. She would always compare being an alcoholic to something more extreme to make it seem like it was nothing. "Speak with confidence. We didn't do anything wrong," she told me.

I nodded my head. She was right, we didn't commit murder. She was, however, under the influence and not taking care of her kids. My uncle usually took my sister to school, and I walked to my school. I ordered take-out almost every day at meal time.

THE MEETING

My mom, uncle, and I took a taxi to the meeting on a Sunday morning. It was in the ACS

building, in a grubby conference room on the third floor. The fluorescent lights made it as bright as a hospital, but the table had coffee stains, and the chairs didn't match. It seemed unprofessional, like they'd cleared out a storage room and grabbed any chair that was free.

My least favorite social worker, Ms. Taylor, was there with her supervisor. So was my favorite social worker, Mr. Khan, who worked for a different agency. His supervisor called in over speakerphone.

There was a facilitator, an older woman with dreads and a friendly smile. There was an advocate to help guide my mom and let her know her options. And, finally, me, my mom, and my Uncle Barry, my father's brother.

Mr. Khan waved at me and I waved back, taking a seat across from him and next to my mom. My uncle sat on my left and cracked jokes to ease the tension.

"Ms. Genevieve," Ms. Taylor's supervisor addressed my mom as she flipped through the file in front of her. "Do you know why we are having this meeting?" She studied my mom.

My mom touched her neck, picking at the collar of her button-up. "I had a few drinks to..." She touched her head. "Because I have headaches sometimes and it calms it down."

The supervisor nodded her head, looking back into the file. As she was flipping through the pages, Mr. Khan jumped in. "The father died of cancer, and the kids didn't receive any therapy or counseling."

This grabbed the attention of the facilitator who was reaching for the file that was in front of her. "The kids never had any

I had lost my dad, and now I was losing my mom to drinking.

form of counseling?" she asked my mom.

My mom cocked her head. "People in the hospital talked to us." I guess she considered a conversation with doctors to be therapy.

My mom fidgeted continuously, touching her face and neck when she talked about my dad passing away and her subsequent drinking.

Different people asked her, "How long have you been drinking?" and "What steps have been taken so far?" They also asked about family that my sister and I could stay with. They needed to familiarize themselves with the case that they suddenly

had to judge.

When someone suggested therapy, I mentally sided with my mom when she said our family did not need therapy. I believed I was strong enough to manage this on my own. I didn't need any stranger to dig up everything I had already buried.

FAMILY IMPROVEMENTS

We went over our family's accomplishments, such as my sister getting on the honor roll, my getting accepted into a STEM program for 10th grade, my mom showing up for all of her alcohol tests. That gave me hope, but it was the calm before the storm.

I didn't need her apology. I just needed for her to come home, healed.

It was time to talk about "family improvements," which was actually a list of problems.

My mom's leg bounced as they called her out for not attending her mandated therapy sessions regularly. I looked at my mom, eyebrows furrowed. This was the first time I'd heard that she hadn't been going to her therapy.

Then it was my turn to speak. Gulping down my fear, I said. "I'm feeling conflicted because my mom says one thing and the papers say another. But I do think an inpatient program would help."

Heads nodded to my words. I looked at my mom sitting next to me, and she was glaring at me with the burn of a thousand suns. My heart dropped as I realized I had demolished my relationship with my mom.

My uncle left halfway through the meeting because of business, so I was the only family member to weigh in.

The adults decided that my mom would have to enter a month-long inpatient treatment. All because of me. The adults made arrangements for Evelyn and me to stay with Uncle Barry, who lives nearby, while Mom went upstate to her program.

After the meeting, my mother was furious. She told everyone she knew about me "throwing

her into jail." I assumed all our relatives from other states and countries thought I'd betrayed her, including my Uncle Barry.

Right before she went away, I saw Barry working on a car outside of my dad's former business, near our house.

I slowed to a stop as he approached me. With my head hanging, I waited for him to tell me I should have kept my mouth shut in the family conference. My eyes brimmed with tears when his paint-covered work shoes stepped in front of my Converse.

But instead of a wave of anger, he pulled me into a hug. "It's OK." He squeezed my shoulders as I sobbed on him in the middle of the sidewalk. "It's OK. You did the right thing."

People walked past and shot strange looks, but it was liberating to be forgiven. Even more liberating was seeing the smile on my mom's face a month later, when she came home from rehab—a sober, genuinely happy smile. She was back to the mom from before my dad passed away.

She talked about what she'd learned at rehab with pride and apologized for the problems she had burdened us with.

I didn't need her apology. All I needed was for her to come home, healed. I got my wish. ■



COUNSELOR REFLECTION

Story Title & Author: "Mother to My Mom" by K.G.

Story Summary: K.G.'s world is turned upside down after her father's death, particularly when her mother turns to drugs and then alcohol to cope. As the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) becomes more involved, K.G. must play an important role in choosing what's best for her mom.

Reflection: Use the questions below to think further about the story and about your own practice with the youth you serve.

- **What are some of K.G.'s strengths?** Sometimes we get so caught up in trying to identify what our youth need and what might be going wrong, that we forget to honor and reflect on what's going right. It's just as important to recognize the strengths of our youth as it is to think about areas of improvement. Practicing with K.G. is a good start.
- **During the meeting in the story on p. 6, what are the people in the room thinking and feeling?** Sometimes there are multiple perspectives, wants, and needs at play in a situation. It's important to consider all the different angles and viewpoints that may be causing individuals to say or do certain things in that situation. When you do this perspective-taking, you question your assumptions. Helping youth do this can also give them much-needed perspective and help build their empathy.
- **How can you develop a rapport with your youth so that they will be open with you?** K.G. often indicates in her story that she withholds information from certain individuals with whom she doesn't feel comfortable. So much of getting to understand youth and helping them to communicate what's going on with them is developing a trusting, open relationship based on good rapport. Think about what it takes to create this type of dynamic with your youth.

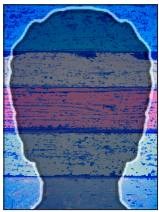
What Happened After Rehab

I learned that alcoholism isn't fixed so easily

BY K.G.

Names have been changed.

It was a week after my mom returned home from court-ordered inpatient rehab. My home



finally felt as it should, comfortable and full of laughter.

My smile lingered as I left my mom and little sister playing their memory

card game at the table in our living room.

I went to the spare room, where we all kept clothes, to grab a sweater. As I was leaving the room, a bizarre sight caught my eye. My burgundy beanie hat seemed to stand on its own, floating about a centimeter off the nightstand.

I crept closer to the nightstand and slowly pulled the hat up. My eyes widened and my heart dropped. I feared I knew what was there but prayed I was wrong.

Under the hat was a tall colorful can. It looked like one of those Monster energy drinks. I lifted up the can with more force than necessary since it was completely empty. Scanning the ingredients, I discovered it wasn't a Monster. Monsters don't have alcohol.

I set the can back onto the nightstand and placed my hat back over it, as if I'd never touched it. The smile I walked into the room with was suddenly too heavy to carry.

I had believed the four-year nightmare of her addiction was over.

My little sister Evelyn and I had stayed with our Uncle Barry and his family while my mom was upstate at her treatment facility for a month. After rehab,

it was clear that she was the healthiest she had been in four years. That was when my father died and she turned to drugs, then alcohol.

When she came home from rehab, my mom apologized for what she'd put us through. The Administration for Children's Services had been involved with our family for a year because of her frequent hospitalizations for extreme drinking, and she verbally abused me when she was drunk.

I was so happy to see her clear and loving again, I forgave her instantly.

Soon after I found the can, she relapsed back to her old slurring, raging, alcoholic self. I was bewildered by why, after finally getting healthy, she'd throw everything away so quickly.

AN EMOTIONAL BURDEN

Only a week after she returned, she tested positive for alcohol. A month later, our ACS caseworker sent Evelyn, who was 9, and me, 15, back to live with Barry, my late father's brother, again. My mom stayed in the home we grew up and fell apart in, and we had supervised visits with her on the weekends.

After my mom relapsed, just before Evelyn and I moved to Uncle Barry's, she and I were driving back from the grocery store. My mom ranted about my uncle and aunt criticizing her drinking.

"You know, people don't like it when you're like that," I said, fiddling with the bottle of juice in my lap, eyes down.

My mom glanced away from the road for a second towards me in the passenger seat. I refused to face her, but I could feel her glare. "What do you mean?"

"Like...not sober." I knew

that the word "drunk" set her off and would derail the conversation. "Uncle doesn't like it when you're drinking. And Auntie only has stuff to say when you're not sober."

"They wasn't mad at me because of that. They was mad because—"

I cut off her excuses with a wave of my hand as respectfully as I could manage. "Forget

about them. I don't care about them," I said. "When you aren't sober, you're different."

Finding words that wouldn't make her flare up in anger was difficult. It was like treading on a minefield. Any sign of disrespect would change the course of our conversation. She would zero in on specific words instead of what I was trying to convey.

My mom remained silent as



I spoke.

"When you aren't sober, you get mean. You say mean things to me. And Evelyn has trouble sleeping because you're always moving and yelling in your sleep."

I pinched my finger to feel something other than the heartache, to distract me from the deafening silence that filled the car.

I was so caught up in my own thoughts that I didn't notice we had pulled into our driveway. My mom dropped her hands in her lap, then reached out and cupped my cheek. "Baby, I'm so sorry."

I pulled away from her. "You can't apologize if you're going to keep doing it."

I laughed to defuse the situation, but we both knew it wasn't

that easy. Confronting her felt pointless and like an emotional burden I didn't want to carry.

But she's my mother. Despite my frustration at being removed from my own home yet again, I still looked forward to visiting her. Seeing her made me happy, though it stung when she was drunk for our visit, like she cared more for alcohol than her own children.

BECOMING MY MASK

I told only my closest friends about her relapse and about living with Uncle Barry. Pushing down my disappointment and fear, I acted like it was normal when my mom stumbled into the house and collapsed on her bed. That hurt, but I did it for my sister. Evelyn was happier when she didn't see me worry. It meant she didn't need to worry either.

Acting happy and going on with my day was difficult. Over time, though, the character I had created for myself—the girl who isn't full of heartache and always crying—had begun to become me. Fake it till you make it. Feeling numb felt better than feeling sad.

Faking happiness at first felt selfish, difficult, unnatural. But over time, it made me happier than being stressed and sad.

Without intending to, I told my guidance counselor, Ms. Lee, about my mom's relapse and my being removed from her house.

Ms. Lee sighed deeply, then said, "Sounds like you're angry at her for throwing this all away when everything seemed so wonderful. Everything was going great and then she picks up drinking again, and now you're stressed out."

She helped me understand what I felt: distressed, disappointed, let down. I nodded

along with her, then said softly, "And I don't know what to do.... I don't know what to do next."

Ms. Lee bit her lip and took another deep breath. Her eyes darted to the ceiling before holding eye contact with me as if she was putting together her thoughts.

"You have done everything. Anytime you come in here, it's always about your mom. Not once have you felt concerned about yourself." I saw pity in her smile.

I was confused, eyebrows furrowed but I still smiled anyway. "Yeah." What else did she want me to do? Complain about my petty struggles? All my other stresses felt irrelevant compared to caring for my mom.

Ms. Lee continued, "Have you ever thought about how you are coping with all this?"

I thought about her question. Why would I need to cope? "I mean, I'm OK. I watch a lot of YouTube videos to take my mind off things."

She laughed at that but got serious again. "With you and your mom, it's almost like the roles are reversed. You shouldn't have to take care of her at this age when you have so much going on. Maybe we should find ways to help you cope. To help you deal with this on your own terms rather than your mom's."

She wanted me to give up on my mom? How could I just let go of her when she's drowning in addiction? Surely there must be something else I could try.

I'VE DONE EVERYTHING

But after replaying that conversation in my head for days, I realized that I have done all that I could. I reported her drug dealers. I called hotlines. I cooperated with ACS and



Sheltering Arms, the agency that keeps track of my family's health and education (see p. 23).

When I found bottles of alcohol in the house, I'd empty them down the sink. I confronted her, as hard as that was for me. I stayed by her side while she vomited in the bathroom at home and on trips to the hospital.

Maybe there isn't anything else I can do to make my mom sober. Maybe this is just my life.

Now, a couple months later, I have officially stopped trying.

drinking to others unless we are being questioned. It seems like ACS will never stop coming around.

I had another shift in my feelings recently, after my mom told me to get my own apartment. It wasn't anything new. She often says these kinds of things when she's drunk and blaming me for her troubles. It usually doesn't affect me, but writing and talking about the situation I'd been denying forced me to face how awful it is.

for myself and not my mom is foreign to me. Ms. Lee suggested that I look into a support group called Alateen.

My immediate thought was, "No way. I don't need to sit with other teenagers and talk about my problems. I need to go out there and try to fix the problem." But I'd done everything, and my mom is still an alcoholic. I can't fix this.

Accepting that there may not be much hope for my mom, I can shift my focus to self-care.

It was tiring caring for her. Worrying about her while I was at school. Getting home and trying to feed my mom before myself. I could feel the role of a parent forcing itself upon me.

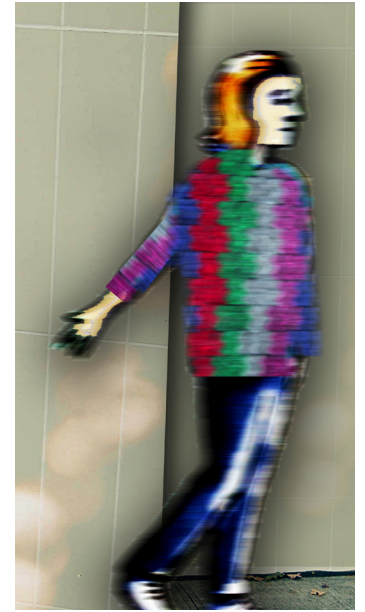
It feels healthy and like a relief to live like a normal teenager, not the caretaker of my mom. I'm able to concentrate on my own issues rather than paying so much attention to what my mom is doing.

At the same time, it's scary to drop the facade and seek help. I found a therapist and I'm really excited to tell my guidance counselor about finally taking her advice.

Writing this story has opened my eyes to a new perspective. Regardless of all my burdens, I pull through. I have started eating healthier and working out. I was accepted into a STEM program for animal care. I am taking multiple college credit courses in high school and plan to be a veterinarian.

I am doing many things I am proud of. I know my dad would be proud of me. And so is my mother. When she's sober and tells me she's proud of me, it feels good. But when she's drunk and says it, she starts to cry and reminisce about my dad.

Or she uses my accomplish-



It feels healthy and like a relief to live like a normal teenager, not the caretaker of my mom.

I still tell my mom every now and then that I wish she would stop drinking. My sister and I never acknowledge my mom's



I softly shut my door and locked it, crawling into bed with my blanket wrapped around me tightly. I took deep breaths and cried for the first time in months.

It physically hurt to let myself feel it all. My heart throbbed and tears streamed like there was no end.

I thought about the facade I had put up a few weeks into my mom's relapse. A mask that let me look at my drunk mom like she was a stranger. I was trying to prevent myself from feeling hopeless with internal walls that protected me from the overwhelming sorrow.

It hurt to finally accept that my life was not OK and that I needed help.

TAKING CARE OF MYSELF

The thought of seeking help

ments against me, saying that I'm going to leave her now that I don't need her anymore. Then she starts telling me to get my own apartment. Drunk, she's self-pitying and then mean—the opposite of supportive.

I'm still there when she really needs someone to physically help her, when she's detoxing or can't walk to the bathroom without falling.

Emotionally, though, I protect myself by thinking of caring for her when she's drunk as a chore. It's just something I have to do before I go back to doing my own thing.

It is lonely, terrifying, and incredibly difficult to move on with my life without my parents. But in a way, I have already started.

I've gotten used to not having my dad in my life anymore. I'm not used to my mom being addicted, and I still hope she can get clean, but I have made it through four years of her addiction. That tells me I can clear other obstacles that may be ahead. ■

Taking Care of Me

SEL FOCUS: RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING

Story Title: "What Happened After Rehab" by K.G.

Story Summary: K.G. finally feels like life is getting back to normal when her mom returns home from rehab. It doesn't last long though, and her mom soon relapses. With the help of a guidance counselor, K.G. realizes that she can only do so much for her mom and starts to shift her focus to her own self-care.

This session is intended to be done one-on-one with a youth.

Learning Objectives

Youth will build their SEL by:

- Understanding the importance of self-care and the impact it can have on one's well-being
- Reflect on the things and people that negatively and positively impact their self-care

Materials

- ☐ One copy each of *Represent* Issue #139 for you and your youth
- ☐ Pen or pencil
- ☐ Paper

Preparation

- Read the story ahead of time.

GETTING STARTED

Review the agenda (posted):

Agenda: Taking Care of Me

- Opening Activity: Opinion Continuum
- Read and Discuss: "What Happened After Rehab" by K.G.
- Explore the Ideas Activity: Letting Go, Holding On

OPENING ACTIVITY — OPINION CONTINUUM

(8 minutes)

This activity helps youth activate background knowledge.

1. After reviewing the agenda, tell your youth that they are going to do an activity where they have a chance to voice their opinion.
2. Tell them:
 - **"I will read a statement and then you will decide whether it's true for you (completely agree), somewhat true or not sure, or not true (completely disagree)."**
 - "You can either tell me your response verbally or answer by giving me a thumbs up (for completely agree), a side-ways thumb (for not sure or somewhat agree), or a thumbs down (for completely disagree)."
 - "Once you've given your answer, I'll invite you to give a reason for your choice."
3. Read the first statement and ask your youth to respond: "It's just as important to take care of yourself as it is to take care of others."
4. Ask your youth why they responded the way they did.
5. Repeat for the next three statements:
 - "Self-care means buying yourself nice things."
 - "Sometimes you have to give up on someone else in order to take care of yourself."
 - "Self-care means putting yourself first."
6. Thank the youth for sharing their opinions.

READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY (20 minutes)

By practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud, youth build comprehension and develop fluency.

1. Introduce the story (see the story summary on the first page of this lesson).
2. Share the expectations for a one-on-one read-aloud: you and your youth will take turns reading the story aloud.
3. Read the story aloud together. Stop periodically to discuss the youth's reactions, particularly as they relate to the discussion you had in the Opinion Continuum. Also, consider asking these open-ended questions during or after the read aloud:
 - What's standing out to you about K.G.'s story?
 - What made her change from trying to take care of her mother to taking care of herself?
 - What advice would you give her if you were her friend?

EXPLORE THE IDEAS — LETTING GO, HOLDING ON

(12 minutes)

During this post-reading activity, youth make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.

1. Introduce the next activity by explaining to your youth:
 - **"Now that we've read the story, we're going to do an activity where we consider what's beneficial to our own self-care and what's not."**
4. Using a piece of drawing paper, model for the youth how to fold the page in half and then open it back up.
5. Next, model for them how to label one half of the paper "Letting Go" and the other half "Holding On."
6. Ask your youth to consider their own self-care. What are the

things, people, habits, or thoughts that drain their energy or take away from their self-care?

7. Next, ask them to consider the things, people, habits, or thoughts that give them energy and contribute to their self-care.
8. Explain that on each half of the paper, the youth should list as many things as they can.
9. Pass out drawing paper and pencils. Have your youth fold their paper and label it using yours as a model.
10. Give your youth some silent think time, and then tell them to begin writing. Offer support and encouragement.
11. After about five minutes, tell your youth to rip the page in half, separating the two sides.
12. To symbolize "letting go," have your youth crumple up that half and toss it into a wastebasket.
13. Next, ask your youth to look at their "holding on" list and share some of the items from their list. Have them include how the items on their list will help them take better care of themselves in all situations.
14. Thank your youth for participating and sharing.

SELF-CARE PLAN

Story Title & Author: "What Happened After Rehab" by K.G.

Story Summary: K.G. finally feels like life is getting back to normal when her mom returns home from rehab. It doesn't last long though, and her mom soon relapses. With the help of a guidance counselor, K.G. realizes that she can only do so much for her mom and starts to shift her focus to her own self-care.

Instructions: As an extension of the youth lesson included—or instead of the lesson—use the steps below to create a self-care plan with youth.

1. **Create a spreadsheet or template so you can monitor their self-care plan and what they will need to maintain a healthy self-care routine.** There are plenty of templates you can find online or you can help your youth create their own.
2. **Have youth fill in the self-care plan with activities and resources they enjoy and that add to their quality of living.** For each, they should record when they have time to engage in those activities and resources.
3. **Also have youth write down possible barriers to their plans.** What can they do to remove these barriers or plan for them?
4. **Youth should keep their plan in a place where they can see it every day.** Making sure the plan is visible will help them think about and commit to the strategies within the plan. It's also a good idea to share the plan with others — friends, family, co-workers, a teacher or mentor—so they can provide further support for your youth.
5. **Make sure youth stick to the plan and practice the activities regularly.** Make the plan a regular part of your check-ins and discuss your youth's progress in different areas of the plan.
6. **Re-assess progress at the end of one month and again at three months.** Be sure to frame challenges as opportunities for improvement, rather than failure.

Something You Can't Fix

What you should know if your parent has a substance abuse problem

BY REPRESENT STAFF

Naomi Weinstein is the former director of the Children of Alcoholics Foundation, director of Phoenix House's center on addiction in the family, and is now VP, Innovations at the Institute for Community Living. She has trained substance abuse treatment providers to better understand child welfare issues.

Represent: When is a parent's alcohol or drug use a problem?

Naomi Weinstein: If the parent's use is causing problems in your life, that's a problem. If

you have to lie for your parent, or cover for them, or get them ready for work, or they're embarrassing you by showing up drunk or high, that's a problem.

It doesn't mean your parent doesn't love you. But it does mean the drug has hijacked your parent's brain. The drugs are in control.

Represent: What do you do if your parent is using drugs, or if you think they're drinking too much?

Naomi: If your parent has a substance abuse problem, that's

not your fault and it's not something that you can fix. You need to focus on keeping yourself safe.

Find a trusted adult who will give you a safe place to do your homework or get fed. That might be a neighbor, a relative, a teacher or school nurse.

You should also find someone who you can talk to, who can help you understand what's happening. Someone in your family, or another person in recovery, can help you understand addiction and what the facts are.

Represent: If you tell some-

one, will they put you into foster care?

Naomi: That depends a lot on what kind of drug it is and how much it's causing your parent to neglect or abuse you and any other children in the home.

In New York, the child welfare system is trying whenever possible not to remove kids. But that's not a guarantee.

If you do get removed from your home, try to think of a friend or family member who can take you in, and tell your social worker that you want to stay with that person.



Represent: Are kids whose parents are addicted to drugs or alcohol more likely to become addicted themselves?

Naomi: Unfortunately, yes. If your parent has a substance abuse problem, you're three to four times more likely to become addicted to drugs or alcohol yourself.

It's important to recognize your own risk for addiction, and take that seriously.

But that doesn't mean you're destined to become an addict. You can do things to protect yourself.

When you're angry or upset, don't turn to drugs or alcohol to deal with it.

Find someone to talk to, or find places and activities that make you feel good about yourself.

Figure out what your strengths are and take advantage of them. And remember that you're not alone.

Represent: How can you help yourself cope?

Naomi: First, you should recognize that you need and deserve services, like mental health counseling and other kinds of support.

You can contact Alateen (see box below) to join a group of other teens who are dealing with an addiction in the family. Or talk to someone at school who you trust.

If you're in the child welfare system, talk to your caseworker. Even if you think you're coping well, talking to someone can give you the support you need to become even stronger, and to cope with some pretty lousy things.

Be open to the kinds of support you do have, even when it comes from unexpected places. While you want to have your mom's love and attention, it may be your grandma who provides it, or it may be your after-school teacher.

Represent: If you reunify with a parent who has been to rehab, what can you expect?

Naomi: It's going to be really tough. When families reunify, at first everyone is going to be on their best behavior.

But after the honeymoon period is over, there's going to be a turbulent, stormy period, and an increase in fighting. It might actually feel like it's worse than it was before your parent got services.

Parents often report that their teen kids are so angry, and just curse them out. The adults are bewildered because they just went through all this treatment.

But the parent may have been gone or out of it for a long time, and suddenly they're trying to step back in and be Mom or Dad, and start imposing rules.

After so much time apart, and at a time when a teen is trying to become an independent adult, trying to find that bond again is a tough process for both parents and kids.

Plus, one thing Mom or Dad is going to learn in treatment is how to express their feelings, and that can lead to more conflict.

Families often manage to stay together right through the addiction and then split up when they come home. That's why it's so important to get family therapy if at all possible.

Represent: What can help

families get through that reunification process?

Naomi: Family therapy, time, and patience. Being able to know what's coming next can help. If something is predictable, it's normal. And if it's normal, it's not a tragedy.

That stormy period takes everyone by surprise. Families think, "If things are this tough, something is wrong." But if they know that it's likely to happen, then somehow it makes those things a little bit more tolerable, because it's normal.

It's important for teens to know that when parents first get out, the focus is on recovery. It takes four to five years before you really consider an alcoholic to be in a stable recovery place.

Treatment is just the beginning of the recovery process. It requires a lot of patience.

Represent: What can you do if you suspect your parent is using again?

Naomi: Using drugs or alcohol again is the last stage of a process that starts with the

person going back to their old values and attitudes and ways of behaving.

If your parent was doing well and always making their meetings, and then they start missing them, that's when you should say something.

Teens can ask another family member or close friend to step in and say, "I've noticed this happening, do you need to talk to somebody?"

You can even call the treatment program and ask them to reach out directly. The idea is to prevent it from happening.

In a household where people are using drugs, there's often a family culture not to tell anyone. There are families that do everything from completely denying what's happening, to putting the shades down so no one can see inside the house, to trying to behave really well so mom doesn't get stressed out and use. But none of those strategies work.

Addiction is a recurring disease and recovery isn't easy. The important thing to remember is that, as a teen, the best thing you can do is help yourself. ■

Get Support From Peers

Alateen is a network of support groups specifically for teenagers whose lives have been affected by someone else's drinking.

Alateen is based on the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, in which people with addictions tell their stories to the group and offer each other support and encouragement.

The groups are free and open to any teen.

To find a group near you, call Alateen/Al-Anon at

1-888-4AL-ANON (1-888-425-2666)

or go to **al-anon.org**.

Interventions Helpful and Not

Child welfare agencies didn't always get it right when dealing with my mom's addiction

BY K.G.

Names have been changed.

The first time New York City's child welfare agency, ACS, leeches itself onto my world, I was 15.

I was dozing in a chair beside my mom's hospital bed. Then the curtain was pulled back, and a stylish woman clutching a small leatherbound notebook to her chest walked in. Another insurance worker double-checking information, I thought.

The scarily energetic woman introduced herself as Ms. Taylor, then said "ACS" and "children," confusing me. Then she asked

my mom, "Is there anyone to take her home?"

My mom looked as puzzled as I was. "I can call her uncle," she replied tentatively.

My mom later explained to me that someone had told ACS, which stands for Administration for Children's Services, about her alcohol addiction.

I assumed the hospital made the call because my mother's alcoholism had gotten so extreme she'd been to the hospital to detox 10 times in just a few months.

My mom realized she could lose her kids. She was provoked and afraid—feelings that she dealt with by drinking.

Ms. Taylor had told us the worst possible outcome was foster care. But she didn't say

much about it, which helped me believe we'd never get to that.

HOME INSPECTION

Ms. Taylor first came to our home a week after we met her in the hospital. She greeted my mom and me excitedly before turning her attention to my 9-year-old sister.

"Hi! My name is Ms. Taylor," she enthusiastically waved. "What's your name?"

In a quiet voice, my sister said, "Evelyn."

Ms. Taylor complimented her name, then our house. She asked our plans for the upcoming weekend.

I wondered, if all ACS does is talk about trivial things, then how do they fix my mom so she could take care of us like she

used to?

Ms. Taylor asked where we slept, what we ate, and how we got to school. She looked in our refrigerator. I didn't like the scrutiny, but I had to admit it made sense. If her job was to find signs of child neglect and malnourishment, she needed to do this.

But she asked the same questions over and over again, which made me feel like I had something to be guilty about.

After a few meetings, she asked to speak to me alone. In the spare room, she asked quietly, sympathetically, "Do you ever see your mom drinking?"

"Not with my own eyes, no."

"Do you know where she drinks?"

"No," I lied. I knew she drank at the garage that my dad ran before he died. Since his death, my mom had taken over the paperwork and managing the employees. It was right near our house, and my Uncle Barry, my dad's brother, worked there too.

"How often do you see her drunk?"

COULD ACS HELP?

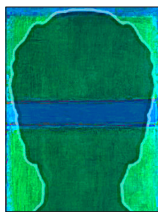
"Like..." I decided to tell the truth because I wanted ACS to help my mom. "Most of the week."

She wrote that down and asked, "Does she ever hit you or your sister?"

"No." I answered, thankful I could be honest about this. "Never."

Ms. Taylor met with my sister afterwards. My mom sat me down immediately after Ms. Taylor left and asked me in a whisper what she'd asked me and how I answered. I lied to my mom so she wouldn't be angry.

After that, Ms. Taylor told the three of us that ACS was doing c



60-day investigation. And after those 60 days, it was clear my mom was addicted.

We now had an “open case.” The possibility of being taken away from my mom had become real.

I went online to research ACS. Its website says it works hard to keep families together, and Ms. Taylor said repeatedly that was her goal. But my mom said their job was to tear us apart.

ANOTHER AGENCY

Four months after the case was opened, another family services organization, Sheltering Arms, came into the picture. Mr. Khan of Sheltering Arms also asked me questions, but seemed friendlier than Ms. Taylor.

“Do you have any careers in mind?” Mr. Khan asked.

“I want to be a wildlife vet when I grow up.”

He smiled and told me about his friend who went abroad as a veterinarian. He seemed calm, and surprisingly, I felt the same way talking to him.



Ms. Peterson from Sheltering Arms was like a kind but strict grandmother. She waddled into our home with her small purse and hugged us like we were her long-lost family.

She seemed to care about our well being. She didn’t scribble things in a notebook after each sentence or examine our house. I didn’t feel judged.

Mr. Khan or Ms. Peterson came over on Sundays, and I didn’t filter my speech the way I did with Ms. Taylor. Even when we did discuss my mom’s addiction, I never felt the need to lie. Talking to them was easy and I felt safe afterwards instead of stressed.

The Sheltering Arms people made it clear that our mom needed to stop drinking. But they didn’t threaten the way Ms. Taylor did.

Ms. Taylor would tell my mom, “Your children will be remanded if this keeps happening,” or, often, “The judge decides what happens based on what they see, and it’s not looking too good.”

Sheltering Arms required my mom to get regular blood tests, and those tests kept proving that my mom still drank. I didn’t know that failing them was worsening the case.

Then she had to attend court-ordered counseling and treatment sessions at an addiction clinic near our house.

Those did not help because (1) my mom does not believe in the power of therapy; and (2) healing from a severe addiction needs to start physically. My mom would shake and have other withdrawal symptoms if she went two or three days without a drink.

One night, my mom accidentally called Ms. Taylor, then

drunkenly handed the phone off to me.

“Hello?” I said in the most normal tone I could conjure up.

“Kiara, what’s going on?”

“I...um, I-”

“I’ll ask

yes or no questions.

Can you respond to them?”

“Yes.”

She asked enough questions to understand that the kids were home with their drunk mom.

She drove to our house, smelled my mom’s breath and smelled all the perfume my mom had coated herself in before Ms. Taylor arrived.

She called my Uncle Barry, my father’s brother, and waited for him to take my sister and me away.

I felt incredibly guilty for being relieved that I could sleep peacefully that night, without any yelling in the middle of the night.

REMOVAL

And that was when ACS officially removed us from our home and we moved in with Uncle Barry. It wasn’t officially kinship foster care, but he is my legal guardian. He doesn’t get paid to take care of us.

After my mom lost custody, I saw Ms. Peterson from Sheltering Arms change from tolerant friend to angry authority.

“What are you doing?” she snapped at my mom one Sunday during our supervised visit. “You don’t care about these kids?”

Shocking as it was, this warning still couldn’t override my mom’s urge to drink.

Then another ACS social worker began to visit

me at school. It was embarrassing to be pulled out of the room by my guidance counselor. I worried that other students would start thinking, “What’s wrong with her?”

I was pulled out of class five times in two months. I hated the curious stares of my peers when I walked back into class. I could not regain my focus after I got back, obsessing instead over the questions I’d been asked. “Did I answer them correctly? Did I forget anything? What if she thinks I’m lying?”

I would get texts from my friends in the class, asking if I was OK. I felt like the damaged friend, and I just wanted to be normal. These visits at school made me feel much worse.

Ms. Taylor explained that some kids feel pressured by their family when they’re asked questions in the house, and that’s why workers were coming to my school.

For me, speaking alone in another room in the house was enough privacy. I wish I’d gotten to choose.

Still, the efforts of ACS were clear. They weren’t the bad guys. They were trying to get my mom detoxed and mentally stabilized, and they were trying to keep my little sister Evelyn and me connected to her yet safe while

I also want the workers to give me more information—about ACS, about foster care, about addiction.

“What’s wrong with her?”

I was pulled out of class

five times in two months.

I hated the curious stares of my peers

when I walked back into class.

I could not regain my focus after I

got back, obsessing instead over

the questions I’d been asked.

“Did I answer them correctly?

Did I forget anything? What if

she thinks I’m lying?”

I would get texts from my

friends in the class, asking if I

was OK. I felt like the damaged

friend, and I just wanted to be

normal. These visits at school

made me feel much worse.

Ms. Taylor explained that

some kids feel pressured by

their family when they’re asked

questions in the house, and that’s

why workers were coming to my

school.

For me, speaking alone in

another room in the house was

enough privacy. I wish I’d gotten

to choose.

Still, the efforts of ACS were

clear. They weren’t the bad guys.

They were trying to get my mom

detoxed and mentally stabilized,

and they were trying to keep

my little sister Evelyn and me

connected to her yet safe while

she kept relapsing.

After a tough meeting with about 10 people, my mom was sent to 28-day inpatient rehab. I was asked my opinion, and though it was hard and my mom was furious, I said I thought she needed the rehab. All other strategies had failed.

She was detoxed and got therapy and counseling without access to alcohol. She came back healthy, apologetic, her old self, and I was so happy.

She relapsed again.

WHAT ACS COULD DO BETTER

I think ACS is right to leave us with Uncle Barry until my mom finally sobers up.

If I were making the decisions, I would try longer rehabs—two months or maybe even more. Keep trying until the person no longer relapses. Programs out in the world where my mom has access to alcohol haven't worked.

As far as how workers talk to us, Mr. Khan and Ms. Peterson from Sheltering Arms both ask questions like we're having a normal conversation.

I can let my guard down around them, and so they get more insight into my condition. They can tell whether I am as joyful as a teenager could be or if I'm silent because I'm hiding things. This way, they're better able to decide what's best for Evelyn and me.

The aggressive questioning of ACS shuts me down, and I don't tell them what's happening.

I also want the workers to give me more information—about ACS, about foster care, about addiction.

When my mom was going to the hospital every other week, I

did my own research to find out what happens in detox. What I found online left me crying about how physically messed up my mom is. The word "death" appeared a lot.

I wish someone had talked to me about detox and addiction and how they relate to my mom.

I think 14- and 15-year-olds deserve to know more about what's going on, but it's trickier with a younger child, like my sister. She's seen more than she should have.

It saddens me that this is her childhood: losing her dad at the age of 6 and then having to deal with an alcoholic mother.

I don't think she needs talk therapy alone, which would force her to acknowledge everything at such a young age.

I'd like her to get something more creative like music lessons or art classes where she can express herself in a positive way and create her own happy place.

I wish ACS or Sheltering Arms could advocate for her to have something that she can remember happily and carry with her as she grows up.

My own thoughts on therapy have shifted lately. I think kids should be offered therapy starting around 8th grade, just before they enter the world of high school where multiple stresses start to weigh everyone down. Therapy could be a lifeline for middle-schoolers.

I wish I had realized this sooner and ignored my mom telling me that a shrink would be pointless.

For years, I ignored everything building up inside of me and thought lying was the best way to protect myself and my family.

It's terrifying to tell the truth

when everyone around you is telling you to "stick up for your family" and that telling the truth will rip you away from your loved ones.

Everyone copes in their own way. Getting help doesn't only mean telling everything to social workers or a therapist.

ACS and Sheltering Arms offered friendly conversations and the suggestion of group therapy (which I don't believe would work for me because socializing makes me anxious).

I would have preferred an internship or access to something that would give me exposure to animals.

Being around animals feels

therapeutic to me. I got an animal care internship through my STEM program. Spending quality time with an introverted hedgehog and an egotistical rabbit helped me feel special and useful.

Providing opportunities to join a community doing something they love could give ACS-involved kids pride and purpose, at the same time it gets us out of the house and into a more comfortable environment.

My main advice to ACS is, help us grow as people at the same time you're listening to us and sharing the truth about what's going on with our parents.■

K.G.'s Tips for Helping Children of Addicted Parents

- Mandate longer rehab periods if an addicted parent needs more time. Keep trying until the parent no longer relapses.
- Give kids more information about how the foster care system works, and about how addiction affects parents. Being kept in the dark increases our anxiety.
- Avoid aggressive questioning of kids. Invest time in getting to know us as people rather than children of addicts, and building a relationship with us. That will help us feel safe and comfortable, and it might keep us from shutting down when something is wrong.
- Give foster care-involved kids access to a wider range of therapeutic activities, not just talk therapy. Especially for younger kids, things like art therapy and art and music lessons can provide an outlet for difficult emotions and something positive to focus on, rather than constantly reminding us of family problems.
- Offer older kids and teens opportunities to get involved in the community in creative ways. Internships and volunteering opportunities can help build our confidence, provide a social outlet, and remind us that we can have a life separate from our family problems. These opportunities also help us prepare for adulthood.

COUNSELOR REFLECTION

Story Title & Author: "Interventions Helpful and Not" by K.G.

Story Summary: K.G. discusses her experience with both the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) and another family services organization. She uses them as examples and offers helpful tips of what to do and what not to do when working with youth.

Reflection: Use the questions and prompts below to think further about the story and about your own practice with the youth you serve.

- **Take notes on a t-chart.** On a separate sheet of paper, make a t-chart that has "what works for K.G." on one side and "what doesn't work for K.G." on the other. Make a list of each and think about how these might work or not work for the youth with which you work.
- Based on what you learned from the story, **identify one practice** you're using that's working and one you'd want to change.
- If you have a youth who is struggling with a parent who has an addiction, which **question/answers from the Q&A** on pp. 11-12, titled "Something You Can't Fix," would be most helpful for them to read and why? At which point would you offer these questions and answers as a resource?