

City of New York
Administration for Children's Services

PROCEDURE #2011/03

**Subject: Requirements for Incorporating a Youth's Voice into the Annual Renewal Process
of Certified and Approved Foster Homes**

APPROVED BY: John B. Mattingly



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**IMPLEMENTATION RESPONSIBILITY:
All Foster Care Provider Agency Staff; Children's
Services Family Permanency Services (FPS) and
Parent Support and Recruitment & Youth
Advocacy and Support Services**

PURPOSE: Incorporating the voices of youth into an agency's foster parent re-certification and renewal process recognizes the important role they can play to help improve outcomes for youth in foster care. Their perspectives and input can be used in the annual evaluation process of the foster home to strengthen the youth's experience and overall quality of life, inform ongoing and appropriate supports to the youth and his or her foster family, and enhance the agency's selection of foster parents who care for youth in out-of-home placement.

This policy advises foster care provider agency staff of new requirements for incorporating the voices of youth into the annual evaluation process of certified and approved foster homes¹.

SCOPE: This procedure applies to all foster care provider agency staff and it should be followed at a minimum, at least once each year, at the time of the initial certification or subsequent reauthorization(s) of foster boarding homes, for all homes in which youth are residing.

This policy does not change existing casework contact requirements or foster home renewal standards involving the placement of foster children under the age of 14.

This procedure is effective immediately.

If you have any question or comments regarding this policy please contact Ronni Fuchs, Director of Youth Advocacy and Support Services at ronni.fuchs@dfa.state.ny.us or Mary Nam, Senior Director of Parent Support and Recruitment at mary.nam@dfa.state.ny.us.

¹ 10-OCFS-ADM-09, "Requirements for Incorporating Youth Voice into the Annual Renewal of Certified and Approved Foster Homes" (8/25/10)

POLICY:

Recognizing the Important Role of Youth

Recognizing the important role that a youth's voice provides in improving the child welfare system and outcomes for children and youth in foster care, foster care agency staff are now required to incorporate a youth's voice into the annual renewal process of certified and approved foster homes as part of the process of evaluating the care provided to the youth in the home.

Youth ages 14 and older will be given the opportunity to respond to questions² for the purposes of gaining the youth's perspective about the care he or she receives in the foster home as well as how the youth thinks his or her experiences in the home could be improved. The information should be gathered from youth about their foster home experience through regular casework contacts with the youth and will be evaluated as part of the renewal process.

Incorporating the voices of youth into an agency's process of re-certifying foster parents and renewing approval of relative foster parents will help the agency gather safety and quality-of-life information³ in foster homes from a new perspective and a new voice in the home – the voice of the foster youth. This will not only round out the perception of life in the foster home from another focal point, that of the youth, it will also assist agencies in selecting foster parents who would likely do well with meeting the needs of adolescents in out-of-home placement, as well as improving ongoing long-term support for a youth and his or her foster parents. A youth's voice will help to improve outcomes for youth in foster care and for the foster parents who provide care for youth in out-of-home placement.

PROCEDURE

Informing Prospective and Current Foster Parents

At the time of recruiting foster parents, and at certification/approval and/or re-certification/renewal of approval, agencies must inform foster parents that youth ages 14 and older will be given the opportunity to respond to questions⁴ aimed at getting the youth's perspective about the care he or she receives in the foster home as well as how the youth thinks his or her experiences in the home could be improved. The foster parents must also be informed that any information about deficiencies in relation to foster boarding home requirements may be taken into account during recertification/renewal of approval.

² See Attachment A, "Youth Voice Questions"

³ Refer to Children's Services Policy #2011/04, entitled "Assessing the Safety and Quality of Life in Foster Boarding Homes," for guidance in the assessment of the quality of care a child or youth receives in a foster boarding home.

⁴ See Attachment A, "Youth Voice Questions"

Utilizing “Youth Voice” Questions

At a minimum, at least once each year as part of regular casework contacts with a child, the child’s case planner or the child’s caseworker must give each youth age 14 and older (placed in a certified foster home or with an approved relative foster parent) the opportunity to respond to the Youth Voice Questions contained in Attachment A of this policy.

Presence of Foster Parents

The foster parents should not be present for these discussions. If the Youth Voice Questions will be asked during a single casework contact, the foster parent should not be made aware of the exact interview date in advance.

Voluntary Participation

Agency staff must explain to the youth that his or her participation in this evaluation process is voluntary and there will be no negative impact on the youth if he or she decides not to respond to the Youth Voice Questions. If the youth chooses to participate, the agency must ensure that there are no acts of retaliation against the youth because of his or her participation.

Note: The requirements of this policy do not apply to former residents of a foster home. That is, if a child is no longer residing in the foster home at the time of the casework contact selected for the completion of the questions, the agency is not required to search out the child for the purpose of completion of the Youth Voice Questions. However, information gathered from a youth residing in the home during the casework contact(s) may be used even if the child was removed from the home prior to the actual renewal of the certification or approval of the foster home.

Utilizing the Information Gathered

Agencies must explain to the youth that the questions will be used to gather information from the youth regarding the youth’s safety and quality of life in the foster home. The information provided by the youth will be used in the annual evaluation process of the foster home and to: (a) strengthen the youth’s experience and overall quality of life in the foster home; (b) provide ongoing and appropriate supports to the youth and his or her foster family; and (c) enhance the agency’s selection and preparation of foster parents who care for youth in out-of-home placement.

Information obtained from the young person as part of this process should be assessed for objectivity.

Foster Parent Access to Information Provided

Agency staff must explain to the youth the circumstances under which the foster parents may have access to information provided by the youth. It must be explained to the youth

that certified foster parents and approved relative foster parents may have access to information provided by a youth in the following circumstances:

(a) When a worker has reasonable cause to suspect that the youth or other children in the household have been abused or maltreated, a child abuse or maltreatment report must be made to the Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment. While a subject of the report is not entitled to the name or other identifying information regarding the source of the report, it is possible that the foster parent may make assumptions as to who the source of the report was based on the nature of the report. The identity of a source of a report may be released by the written consent of the source. Finally, it is possible that the identity of the source may be released by court order.

(b) If the agency utilizes the information provided by the youth to deny renewal of a certificate or approval and/or remove the foster youth from the home, the identity of the youth may be identified at a fair hearing or court proceeding on the issue of denial or renewal and/or removal.

(c) If the foster youth identifies criminal activity on the part of his or her foster parent(s), the agency would be expected to bring this to the attention of law enforcement. It is possible that law enforcement would seek to know the source of the information.

(d) If the foster youth shares information that affects his or her quality of life, the agency should facilitate a family meeting or Family Team Conference (if applicable) with the foster parent and youth to resolve those issues and when appropriate to maintain the current placement. The agency should not wait until recertification or renewal of approval to bring up and/or address these issues.

As is currently required, any information received from a youth that raises concerns related to the health, safety and well-being of the youth in the home must be reported within established timeframes to agency leadership and/or ACS for appropriate follow-up and any needed actions⁵.

Granting Renewals While Awaiting Youth's Response

Agencies must not let an existing certificate or letter of approval to board expire solely because the agency is waiting for a youth to respond to the Youth Voice Questions. If an agency has all of the other documents or information otherwise required for the decision of whether or not to grant renewal, but for the response to the Youth Voice Questions, the agency must make a decision on renewal without the Youth Voice responses.

⁵ Refer to ACS memorandum, "Revised State Central Register Reporting Requirements for Mandated Reporters and Expansion of Social Services Workers Classified as Mandated Reporters", dated July 1, 2008.

In the event that the response to the Youth Voice Questions is received by the agency at a later date, where appropriate the agency is expected to use this input as originally intended and as outlined above, including: to strengthen the youth's experience and overall quality of life in the foster home; to inform provision of ongoing and appropriate supports to the youth and their foster family; and to enhance the agency's selection and preparation of foster parents who care for youth in out-of-home placements. Where the information reflects legal issues such as those relating to suspected child abuse or maltreatment or compliance with New York State Social Services regulations relating to foster family boarding homes (18 NYCRR Part 443), the agency must take appropriate steps to address such issues.

Note: Nothing in this policy is intended to modify the standards for the determination of whether or not to grant renewal of a certificate or approval of a foster home, and is not intended to modify or diminish the level of casework contacts made in regard to foster children under the age of 14.

Documentation

A youth's responses to the Youth Voice Questions must be documented electronically in an OCFS-issued template, which can then be pasted⁶ and inserted into the Progress Notes. A youth's refusal to respond to a particular question(s) or all of the Youth Voice Questions, must be noted on the template as well. Additionally, when a youth refuses to respond verbally to the Youth Voice Questions, the agency should explore the reason(s) for refusal and follow up by offering another opportunity to respond either verbally or using another method (for example, in writing).

⁶ The electronic template created by the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) may be found on the ACS Intranet Website via the following path: **Docushare>>Forms>>Foster Care & Preventive Services>>Parent Recruitment and Expedited Permanency Unit**. Refer to Attachment A (hard copy sample of Youth Voice Questions) to become familiar with its contents.

Attachment A

Youth Voice Questions

Child's Name:

Case Planner/Case worker:

Date:

Each year, as part of the casework contacts, the child's case planner or the child's caseworker must give youth between 14 and 21 years of age the opportunity to participate in the evaluation of his or her foster home by responding to the questions below. The Youth Voice Questions are intended to be used by foster care provider agency staff to guide a youth in discussions about the youth's perspective related to his or her safety and quality of life in his/her foster home. Provider agency staff must not change the intent of the questions but are encouraged to ask the questions in their own words. Staff may need to simplify or clarify questions to assist youth in providing feedback. Staff members may discuss the questions with a youth over a period of time or during a single casework contact with the youth.

1. How are you getting along with everyone in the foster home? (Prompt with names of individuals, if applicable.)
2. Do you feel welcome in your current foster home? If not, please explain why.
3. What do your foster parents do to make you feel comfortable and safe? Is there a way to improve your comfort?
4. Do you feel that you can talk to your foster parents and ask them things? Do you feel that they listen to you? Please explain.
5. What do you like about living in your current foster home? Is there anything that you dislike?
6. Do you have everything you need? What do you need that you do not have? Is there anything I (the interviewer) can help you with? (Define need- such as emotional, physical etc.)
7. Do you feel like you are treated like other youth your age or have the same rules as youth your age? Please explain.
8. How do your foster parents support visits and/or contact with your birth family, brothers, sisters, etc.?
9. How do your foster parents support your social life and time with your friends?

10. Do you feel your foster parents are supportive and/or involved in your goals and activities regarding:

- Your Permanency Plan
- After-school, community activities, etc.
- Service Plan Reviews, meetings, court, etc.

11. Is there anything you would like your foster parents to do to help you succeed? If yes, please explain.

12. How do your foster parents assist you in preparing for your future? In what ways?

13. Is there anything in general you would like to change or improve in your foster home? If yes, please explain what it is that you would like to change or be improved.

14. Would you recommend this family to other youth in foster care who are between 14 and 21 years of age? If no, please explain the reasons for not recommending this family.

15. How do you feel now that you have participated in the annual evaluation process of your foster home?

16. Is there anything you would like to share that I have not asked or anything you would like to talk about or add?