WORDS MATTER

Hurtful and Helpful Language About and With Youth in Foster Care

LYGHT
LISTENING & LED BY YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE
GRIEF, HOPE, & TRANSITIONS

Youth in foster care report they experience a lot of stigma and, as a result, often want to hide that they are in foster care from friends, classmates, and adults. One of many examples youth discuss in feeling labeled, demeaned, or disrespected is through the language people use to describe them, as well as how some adults speak to them. The following examples are from youth themselves, gleaned from interviews and L.Y.G.H.T. peer-grief support groups.

By being mindful of the language we use, we can avoid unintentionally stigmatizing youth, while promoting an environment of dignity, respect, and belonging. As a general guideline, however, we advocate for speaking with youth about their preferred language and terminology which promotes dignity, respect, and self-worth.

Here are some terms that may hurt, as well as terms that may help.

1

Hurtful: Orphan
While the term "orphan" is still used in some official documents and contexts, most professionals in child welfare have moved away from the term because of its stigmatizing connotations. Most youth in foster care do not want to be called "orphans" for many reasons, including feeling reduced to that label which often evokes negative images.

Better: Youth in foster care

2

Hurtful: Kid
While there are multiple opinions on the use of the word "kid" to describe children and/or teens, the most important opinion is that of the youth themselves. "Kid" may be received as more informal than "child" or "teen" and is often used to refer to younger children. Most of the teens and young adults we've listened to do not want to be called "kids."

Better: Youth, child, teen
To align with what teens and young adults have shared with us, we recommend using the terms "teen," "young adult," or "youth,' instead of "kid."

3

Hurtful: Foster child(ren), foster teen, foster youth
"We don't want to be defined by being in foster care, as if there's no more to us than that" sums up why these terms, while descriptive, are not "people-first" language which recognizes the full experience of being a child or teen.

Better: Child/teen/youth in foster care
Some youth also prefer being described as "someone who has experienced foster care," or "someone with foster care experience."

4

Hurtful: This is your family now

Telling a child or teen, "This is your family now" is tantamount to saying, "You're not going or can't go back to your birth family/original family, and you need to accept it." It disregards the losses and grief the child or teen may be experiencing as a result of losing family members, as well as other losses associated with the changes in friends, home, school, etc.

Better: Listen and be open to youth's feelings

Don't make judgments or tell a child or teen what they should do, think, or feel related to placement decisions. Rather, listen and be open to youth's feelings and provide opportunities for them to express them, and consider avenues for expression like journaling, music, movement, activities, etc.

5

Hurtful: What did you do to be in foster care?

This statement assumes the child or teen is at fault for entering foster care. Placing the blame on the child or teen feeds the self-blame some youth have that *if only* they'd been a better child, or if only they hadn't told anyone about their parent's drug use, or *if only* they'd stopped their parent from driving under the influence, they could still be together as a family.

Better: Ask open-ended questions that don't intrude on personal information

Allow the child/teen to share as they wish about the circumstances that led to them being in foster care. Rather than prying and intruding on their personal information, open the conversation with questions about themselves: What do you miss now that you're living where you are now? What are some things I (we) can do that will be helpful to you during this time? Who do you trust and who can you talk to?

6

Hurtful: Your "real"parents or your "real family"

Families have varying constellations and members, and youth have their own language to describe their relationship to a parent or family member, as well as to family members in a foster home or other family setting. Youth may refer to a cousin as a sibling; an aunt as their mother; etc. The definition of "real parents" or "real family" is as individual as the child or teen themselves.

Better: Reflect what the youth says

Reflect the language the child or teen uses, as they are the best ones to define any relationship in the terms they choose.

7

Hurtful: Troubled kid, troubled teen, delinquent

Labeling a child or teen who is in foster care as "troubled" further stigmatizes the experience of the child or teen whose circumstances have led to them being placed in foster care. They may have experienced troubling circumstances but categorizing youth as troubled or delinquent places the blame for their situation on them rather than on the situations they have experienced.

Better: The person's name

Instead of using labels to describe the youth, adults should refer to the youth by their name and objectively describe any actions or events related to the youth. For example, instead of saying "D.J. is delinquent," we suggest saying "D.J. has not been attending school, and vandalized a wall outside of a local store."

This language focuses on the specific behavior or event rather than using judgmental terms about the youth.

8

Hurtful: Why do you miss them? It's their fault you're in foster care! You should be happy you're not around them anymore, at least now you have a roof over your head.
Many youth with a parent or parents whose behavior contributed to them being placed in foster care would still prefer to be with their family, despite the circumstances. Many parents who have substance use issues or other conditions that interfere with good parenting love their child or children and want the best for them.

Better: Ask the person how they are experiencing changes in their lives
Rather than make assumptions or criticize the youth for what they feel, believe, or wish, let them share with you how they are experiencing the changes in their lives (e.g., family, friends, home environment, etc.)

9

Hurtful: You think life's hard now? Wait until you become an adult!
Yes, adults do say this to youth in foster care, and the impact is to make the youth experience more hopelessness than they might already be feeling. Many youth in foster care have been told or read about the 'odds' that face them in terms of a reduced chance of graduating from high school, barriers to entering the workforce, winding up in prison, and other doom-based future roadblocks.

Better: Ask the person about their goals
Explore with the youth what their strengths are, help build on them, and find out what they need to meet their goals. It may be no one has asked them about goals, or even considered they might have any, so if they don't know, help them do so, even if they're small steps.

10

Hurtful: Everything happens for a reason Statements like this, or "every cloud has a silver lining" and "everything happens for the best" are experienced as patronizing ways people try to make youth feel better.

Better: Express interest in what the person is experiencing
It's better to keep personal opinions to yourself and express interest in what the child or teen is feeling and experiencing.

As you interact with or speak about a youth in foster care, you might ask yourself, does this question or statement:

- reflect the dignity and worth of the youth with whom I am speaking, or whom I am speaking about?
- demonstrate compassion, inclusivity, and nonjudgment?
- include biases, stereotypes, or stigmas related to youth in foster care?
- promote a welcoming invitation for a youth to express their challenges, fears, experiences, and hopes without judgment or "bright-siding" their experience?

All youth in foster care deserve to be surrounded by people and a community where they are valued and respected. The language we use to talk about and with youth in foster care has the potential to be helpful and the potential to be harmful. By paying attention to the language we use and drawing upon trauma-informed and grief-informed best practices, we can create a more inclusive and welcoming environment where belonging, respect, and worthiness flourish.

Our Mission: L.Y.G.H.T. is an evidence-based peer grief support intervention that specifically addresses youth's death and non-death losses in foster care. At the core of the L.Y.G.H.T. program, we aim to raise awareness about how youth in foster care who are grieving experience marginalization on various levels, to create ways to provide trauma-informed peer support to youth in foster care, and to promote the importance of moving the child welfare community toward a grief-informed holistic model of care. L.Y.G.H.T. is a program of Life Transitions International. For more information, visit lyghtprogram.com. ©2026

get grief-informed
A CALL FROM YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

PRESENTED BY L.Y.G.H.T.
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