Supporting Young Parents with System Involvement: A Conversation with Juvenile Law Center Advocates

Adolescent Health & Well-Being

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The youth advocacy program at Juvenile Law Center serves as a model for how to help prepare young people to lead advocacy and policy reform efforts in Philadelphia and beyond. As a Stoneleigh Emerging Leader Fellow doing research with parenting teens, I had the pleasure of sitting down with a group of their energized, insightful, young advocates this summer to learn more about their experiences as young parents involved in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems. During these listening sessions, I witnessed the power of youth voice and the importance of elevating and centering the voices of those with lived experiences in making meaningful change.

The advocates shared that being a young parent in the system comes with its own set of challenges and victories. Many expressed discontent with the lack of supports available, fear of repercussions from seeking

help and difficulty in making their voices heard. They named juggling school, work, parenting, and child care, coupled with instability and navigating systems, as some of their unique challenges. Specifically, there were many conversations about negative experiences related to mother/baby placements, independent living and foster care generally. There was a sentiment of dissatisfaction with the intrusiveness and punitive and restrictive nature of group placements, as well as challenges in their ability to co-parent. From those who shared stories of support and connection to resources, they called for more consistency across programs. Through this all, a running theme was that of a life in transition—the desire to establish oneself as a parent and create a better future for his or her children, while also seeking guidance, stability, support and trusting relationships.

Young parents often do not receive the care and support they need, which is only heightened for those with system involvement. In addition, more than 4 in 10 low-income adolescent and young adult mothers have past exposure to the child welfare system. Given this, more attention needs to be paid to their unique needs. So for National Family Caregiver's Month, I continued the conversation with Marcía Hopkins, Juvenile Law Center's youth advocacy & policy senior program manager, and three Juvenile Law Center youth advocates—Shy Hill, Anthony Simpson and Alexandria Rivera—to learn more about their experiences and hear their thoughts on what can be done to better support young parents with system involvement.

Kali Hackett: What rights do teen parents have in the child welfare system?

Marcía Hopkins: In Pennsylvania, youth in foster care who are or will become parents have the same legal rights to care for their child as any other parent. Legally, the youth's child cannot also become a "dependent" or enter foster care solely because the parent (the youth) has entered foster care. If a parent (youth) believes this is happening, they should contact their attorney. Youth who are parents should have their child remain in their physical and legal custody, and all efforts should be made to ensure that parents and their children remain together and are supported. Youth who are parents have all rights, like other parents, to make decisions for their child; like making decisions about their child's education and medical needs. Youth should always talk to their attorney and caseworker for questions and information about their rights. For more information on the rights of Pennsylvania youth, including youth parents, who are in foster care please see our Know Your Rights Guide.

Alexandria Rivera: I know some teens' rights in the child welfare system, not all, but I think the biggest problem with them is there is no easy way for teen moms to get the knowledge on the basic rights. In J4J (Juvenile's for Justice) and YFC (Youth Fostering Change), we've created so many things for other issues and I think we should do the same for teen moms.

Shy Hill: Teen parents have custody of their child unless taken to court to remove those rights! I cannot express this enough. When I was in foster care, I left the system due to unfair treatment to my child's father. I signed a board extension (which extends a youth's time in care) at the age of 19, but was free to go at any time. When I left, the staff called the police and the police notified them that my child and I were free to go because there were no court documents stating I was mandated to remain there. I arrived in Philadelphia with my child where I was originally from. I received a call that I had to bring my child to the Department of Human Services (DHS) and hand him over because I left without permission and my child is under DHS (hence my child was 2 days old, they did not know he was born yet, and did not have any documents.) I did as I was told and did not have any contact with my child for two months. No one from DHS reached out after he was taken. I received an emergency court hearing at which I found out from the judge and my youth advocate that my child should not have been taken, my child had no court involvement and that when I left the system, I should have been signed out of care.

KH: Many programs and services for families are often not designed to support the unique needs of system-involved, young parents. What recommendations would you give programs in thinking about how to tailor or enhance their services to better support these families?

Anthony Simpson: Having a system in place that is understanding of growth and gives young parents the room to ask questions and make mistakes without feeling as though their parental rights are consistently on the line or they have a risk of losing their child. This allows for the young person to actually learn what works best for their parenting style and fall comfortably into a role of a parent without the unforgiving nature of the child welfare or juvenile justice systems being a factor in whether they maintain their rights.

AR: Well for one, people can start by creating a program that best supports young parents. AIC (Achieving Independence Center) will be a good start too, to build off what they already have for youth.

MH: As a social worker in the field, we do not do enough to design programs at their inception that are co-designed with youth to fit their best needs. We need to ask more questions, and acknowledge culture and traditions when creating services and programs that authentically support the needs of all families.

KH: What should providers be mindful of when working with system-involved young parents?

AS: Oftentimes, these young people have traumatic or just very poor experiences with providers and simply their presence can illicit reactions that typically a youth would know is not conducive to their case planning. It's important to recognize these unique triggers and work with young adults to address any issues that may have arisen in the past that prevent them from having a functioning relationship with their child welfare team member.

AR: Do not talk to us like we're kids. We know more than you think, so you don't have to beat around the bush. Keep it real. Trust me, the first lie you tell will ruin your relationship with a young parent forever. We need you to help us. That's all you should be doing.

KH: How can the child welfare system better support foster youth who have a child or children?

SH: The child welfare system can better support foster youth who are parenting by first starting to look at the needs of any parent, the needs of a child in general, then add tax; meaning to then include the needs of someone in the system. The child welfare system tends to separate the needs, which does not support the child or the parent(s).

Some examples include:

- Ensuring both parents can be a part of the child's life
- Keep in mind that the responsibilities of a parent are different than a non-parenting youth
- Give equal treatment and opportunities to parenting males
- Resources to help parents develop and parent effectively including money management, secondary education, building credit, etc.

AS: By providing the young person with resources tailored to their specific child care needs and by creating a hotline to assist with live, over-the-phone tips and tricks for younger parents who may not have supportive adults within their lives to provide advice that is specific to their situation and makes them feel as though they're being taught something they don't know instead of being chastised for not knowing.

AR: We have WIC, free daycare when we need it.

KH: What are the advocacy priorities for young parents with experience in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, and where are there opportunities for change?

AR: I would say our main priorities are to share our stories, strengths, and weaknesses, and we can create and build campaigns and resources for everyone if we work together. We have a lot of opportunities for change. Once we do so, we take it step by step. Even if the next step is smaller than the last, it's guaranteed to make a big difference for the future.

AS: The main advocacy priorities should include the reduction in the frequency in which young adults with system involvement have their own children entered into the system, better parenting and financial literacy courses for young parents that are intuitive and can address questions, as well as a new protocol for foster-aged youth within the system so that they can recognize their vast autonomy as parents and feel as though they can adequately take care of their child without system intervention.

KH: How does Juvenile Law Center support youth to advocate for these issues?

AR: There's so much I would love to say, but we have books and a website you can check out, donate if you would like. I will say Juvenile Law Center was the best thing that ever happened to me—it was like more of a wakeup call. I've learned a lot working with people who have the same or more experience I have in the system.

MH: We believe that young people with involvement in these systems are best suited to develop and help push for reforms. They have the knowledge of having lived these experiences and thus have the understanding and insights best needed to improve and change the system for themselves and others.

Young people in our Youth Advocacy Program are supported to develop their leadership skills, political knowledge, communication and storytelling skills, and a sense of community. They affect policy change through policy advocacy, media outreach and public education. Each year, youth advocates in Youth Fostering Change and Juveniles for Justice select an area of focus, determine a strategy to address it, and implement their project.

We believe our office has an obligation to work alongside the young people we often represent to do this work—truly we all do. "We" (practitioners & professionals) must engage and discuss with children and youth, particularly youth of color, especially Black, Native American, and Latinx youth who are overrepresented in these systems.

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