



# So You Want to Include a Lived Experience Expert

## A tipsheet for authentically and intentionally engaging people with lived experience in the foster care system

### Authentic:

*working in an emotionally appropriate, purposeful, and responsible way that is genuine*

### Intentional:

*being thoughtful by checking for alignment in values and beliefs and making deliberate efforts in the way you work with people*

### Lived Experience Experts:

*people who have had lived experience navigating the child welfare system*

There is increasing interest in engaging lived experts in the development of law, policy, training, and organizational leadership. Before diving in, it is important to think through the why, who, what, when, and how.

### Why?

Pause and consider the “why” that drives you: check in with yourself and ask if engaging a lived experience expert is simply to mark a checkbox or if its purpose goes beyond that. **While sharing parts of an individual’s personal experience can be helpful in a project, this shouldn’t be the expectation or the main reason to invite their participation.** Recognize and honor what lived experience experts can bring to the table. You can think about it this way: a kids’ game that is sometimes played is “I see something you can’t see” or “I spy,” where one person points out something they see until the other person sees it. A lived experience expert brings what people who haven’t personally experienced navigating the system can’t see about a project. This is why we, as a field, need to be sure we are engaging people with lived experience, *always*.

### Key Considerations:

- *Why would you like to include people with lived experience in your work, your project, or your team?*
- *What is it that you want to achieve when including lived experience experts?*
- *Pause and think about power-sharing: how much say will the people with lived experience have in the trajectory of the work you would like to include them in? Are you engaging them in a way that gives them agency in the project to disagree? This will help inform the “why.”*



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## Who?

Who do you want to engage? It's important to recognize people with lived experience as the growing people and professionals they are. Along with their lived experience, many people who have navigated the foster care system have also gained professional and/or academic experience that further solidifies and enhances the invaluable perspective they bring to your project. **Many young people have shared that they don't feel valued beyond their personal experience.** It's critical to recognize and honor lived experience experts as whole people with numerous areas of specialized expertise. There are many gaps in who is being invited to partake in opportunities that help inform the shifts that need to happen to improve the system. These gaps are often due to lack of diversity in different areas including but not limited to race, ethnicity, cultural background, foster care experience, and what life trajectory the person with lived experience has taken.

### Key Considerations:

- *How are you considering the expertise of individuals with distinct ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, religions, sexual orientations, etc.? Are you also considering diversity of experiences navigating the foster care system — individuals who were reunified, adopted, lived with family, and lived apart from family?*
- *What value do you place on personal versus professional experience? Do you value them equally? Are you valuing lived expertise similarly to how other areas of expertise are valued? While for some opportunities it may make sense to consider individuals with more professional experience under their belt, it is important to see the value in lived expertise similarly to how other areas of expertise are viewed.*

## What?

What will lived experience experts do on your project and gain from your project? Many of the outputs in the child welfare system are projects, reports, movements, etc., intended to bring positive change for children and families involved. In addition to outlining with specificity what lived experience experts will do on your project, you must also identify the benefits they will gain from taking part in this work. **You must think about how else this opportunity can be beneficial to the young person, outside of this one event or project.** Often, people with lived experience are invited to be a part of the conversation but don't always leave with valuable skills or social capital that can help them along their career path.

### Key Considerations:

- *What kind of professional development skills can lived experience experts hope to gain/what skills are you providing the space for them to learn?*
- *What kind of professional relationship can they expect beyond the work? Are there people on the team whom they can list as references or people they can reach out to for professional insight or guidance?*
- *If the project is developing a product such as a document, video, or report, how will participants be recognized?*
- *What is their title and duration of the work? Is this something they can put on their resume and be able to speak about with a clear understanding of what their role is? Does the title provided speak to the level of work they were involved in?*

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## When?

You must consider where you are in the project and whether your timing for engagement supports your goals for authentically engaging youth. It is critical that you are clear about timelines and transparent about who will have a say throughout the process and who will get to ultimately make the final decision. Two questions to ask yourself and/or your team:

- Key Considerations:**
- *Is the project one that is already conceived and nearing the end of planning?*
  - *Or, are you including individuals with lived experience at the formation stage of your project?*

If you're including people authentically and intentionally, your answer to the first question will be no, your answer to the second question will be yes. Often, young people are invited once plans and details are put in place, with little to say about what can be changed or how. **It is best to have all stakeholders, including people with lived experience, involved at the outset of any new project or idea.** This is how to most authentically and intentionally include lived expertise. Even better, as you continue to strive to engage youth in the most authentic way possible, you must move towards having all of the work you do led, co-led, or informed by lived experience experts.

## How?

When considering how to approach and invite individuals with lived experience, you first must think about compensation. It is important to pay them for the work and that the wage encompasses both their lived and professional experience.

Second, it is important to prepare yourself by reading or consulting with others about what it means to *authentically* engage youth. **It's crucial to recognize that authentic engagement takes time and proper support.** You should designate a point person who lived experience experts can contact and who will check in with them regularly. Even when working through a trauma-informed lens, people with lived experience may still experience triggers or feel the weight of the work differently. Having someone who understands and can support them can be very beneficial, both to the lived experience experts and to the work itself.

Third, intentionality includes making the time before and after meetings to prepare and debrief. Debriefing helps ensure everyone understands what was discussed and what direction the project is going in, as well as provides an opportunity for mutual feedback. **It helps to check in about how the process is going to ensure that lived experience experts feel comfortable and have space to share their thoughts and opinions.**

Finally, while people with lived experience should absolutely have the agency as to whether or not they disclose personal stories, it should not be the expectation. Often, professionals ask people who have navigated the foster care system questions about their personal histories, expect them to share their information as part of their involvement, or make assumptions about their experiences. Sharing personal anecdotes can be very powerful, but if people are not properly prepared to do so or are doing so because it is an expectation, rather than a personal choice, this wouldn't lend itself to authentic or intentional lived experience engagement. →

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## Key Considerations:

- *Will the lived experience experts you are engaging be compensated with an appropriate wage?*
- *What emotional and professional development supports do you have in place for the professionals you are preparing to work with?*
- *What assumptions or biases do you have about someone's lived experience? Are you assuming what they may or may not be comfortable with? Are you having open-minded conversations that do not generalize one lived experience?*
- *Does engaging young people mean that they must share their personal stories to help get the point across? Or, are you seeking their participation as consultants? If you want to engage them authentically, you need to make sure you are seeking their expertise and not just their personal experiences.*

Engaging people with lived experience takes time, thoughtfulness, and openness to shift from how things were done previously. People with lived experience are so much more than their personal stories; they have a lot of insights and powerful ideas. Make sure that you are providing them with the agency and power to challenge all stakeholders involved and bring change, and that you aren't bringing them in at the end for a stamp of approval. **Before going into the who, what, when, and how, start with the why.** Start with your why, your organization's why, and reflect on what is needed from there to ensure that you are engaging lived experience experts in the utmost authentic and intentional way.

## Resources:

- **Juvenile Law Center**  
*Building the Field of Ethical, Authentic, and Youth-Led Advocacy: Key Components of a Youth Advocacy Program*  
<https://jlc.org/resources/building-field-ethical-authentic-and-youth-led-advocacy-key-components-youth-advocacy>
- **American Bar Association Resolution – 115**  
<https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/directories/policy/annual-2020/115-annual-2020.pdf>
- **Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative**  
*Menu for Youth Engagement*  
<https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/resources/menu-for-youth-engagement-guide/>  
*The Secret Sauce: A Recipe for Authentic, Honest, and Trusting Relationships With Youth*  
<https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/resources/the-secret-sauce/>

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