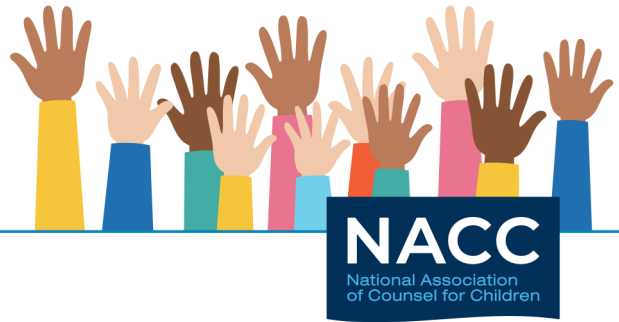


YOUR CASE, YOUR RIGHTS: YOUR GUIDE TO EXERCISING SELF-ADVOCACY



An Interactive Journal for Foster Youth

This journal is a tool that accompanies the Your Case, Your Rights: Your Guide to Exercising Self-Advocacy document, so youth in foster care can make a plan with concrete steps and actions needed to exercise their rights. Like the Your Case, Your Rights: Your Guide to Exercising Self-Advocacy document, this journal was also created for foster youth by former foster youth as well as attorneys who currently represent foster youth.

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Step 1: Believing in Your Rights

Practice Self Affirmations

As we conducted [surveys and focus groups](#) to gather input to make the [Guide](#), a common theme we heard from foster youth was they did not feel they were worthy to advocate for themselves or make a change. They had to find supportive people to help change that mindset and exercise their rights. First and foremost, know you are worth having your rights respected. You can practice this by thinking, saying, or writing general positive statements to yourself such as “I am worthy” or “I deserve to be respected” or “I deserve to have my rights protected.” Once you have come up with affirmations that help you believe in your rights, you can get more specific with themes. For example, highlighting things such as “I am a gifted artist/writer/listener/singer” or “even though I have survived [certain situation], I am still deserving of love.” Adding specificity to these self-affirmations can help you to believe in and love yourself in addition to believing in your rights.

Jot down a few self-affirmations that you would like to tell yourself right now and/or regularly.

“I deserve to have my rights protected.”

Identify Spaces and People That Empower You

Consider the people that already do honor your rights. You can start by thinking about who you can and want to go to when you have a problem. Some partners might be your attorney or GAL (if one is assigned to you), a child welfare caseworker, a school staff member, a foster/resource parent, a counselor etc. You can also consider other people in your life, such as after school clubs, sport coaches, faith leaders, etc. When the reporting process is emotionally overwhelming, takes a lot of time, or is complicated, these are the people that can support you when it’s hard. Write down the names and contact information of who these safe, trusted people are or could be.

Soccer coach: text (xxxxxx-xxxx).



Next, think of the places and spaces that make you feel empowered. This could be youth advocacy non-profits, [youth advisory boards](#), community-based or school-related advocacy or support organizations. [Your Case, Your Rights: Your Guide to Exercising Self- Advocacy](#) document names specific organizations you can get involved with. If you can stay up-to-date with these services or connect to people who know these specific services, it can help you feel connected to a community that cares, is knowledgeable, and can help you practice advocacy skills. Write down these spaces you have or the ones you want to contact and their information.

City of location Youth Advisory Board- [www.website.com](#).

Step 2: Discovering and Knowing Your Rights

Keep Track of Your Rights

To learn what your rights are, there are a few options:

- 1) You can use our [Your Case, Your Rights: Your Guide to Exercising Self- Advocacy National Map](#) that has foster care legislation, agency documents, and right guides for states and territories.
- 2) You can request information from your attorney/ GAL directly.
- 3) You can look online to conduct your own research.

Jot down your sources for finding your rights and what rights you have below.

National map- I have a right to see my siblings every week as listed in my state Foster Care Bill of Rights.



Jot Down Unfamiliar Terms

There will likely be complex language used throughout many foster care documents and processes. As you are reading through your state/jurisdiction's rights documents, ensure that you can define any language you may not fully understand. You can jot down these terms below as they come up. Share this list with your attorney when you meet and ask them to explain the meaning of each, use Google, or contact a local library for information on how to access a legal terms dictionary or glossaries- like <https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex>

Ombudsman: an office that investigates concerns/ complaints about a public agency like Child Protective Services.

Step 3: Self-Advocacy Planning

Gather Evidence and Documentation

Sometimes the best way to help others understand your rights have been violated is to show them information that supports what you say. To do this, develop a plan to collect existing and future documentation that relates to your concern. It's also helpful to keep a log for rights violations that are ongoing or happen multiple times. This may include but is not limited to text messages, pictures, emails, written notes/letters, or any other forms of informal communications, as well as formal documents (e.g., school reports, court reports, case files). This can be very helpful, but don't get discouraged to report if you are not able to gather evidence. Your words and your truth are also a form of evidence that others should take seriously.

Make a list of the forms of evidence you have.

-Screen shot of being told I couldn't go to a friend's house because I told my case manager my foster parent called me an offensive name.

-In my notes app I documented " On March 12th, the family ate a homemade dinner together but I was told not to eat it."



Note: As you are gathering documentation and evidence to report a rights violation concern, consider the risks of the information being discovered by someone who doesn't want you to bring this information forward. If a cell phone is being used, are text messages and search history frequently checked? Is the conversation happening in a space that could be overheard or eavesdropped on? If email is being used, do other people have the password or would it be open for them to see (e.g., shared computer)? Being discreet may minimize the risk of retaliation.

Prepare Your Talking Points

Effective self-advocates are well-prepared. Writing down your main points in advance helps to ensure you don't forget anything and offers the opportunity to organize your thoughts in order of priority. Below are some prompts to help write out your thoughts and provide a clear account of your concern. This will help tell your story in a way that is factual, compelling, and makes a connection to the specific right(s) being violated.

Who is the person(s) violating your rights? Who else observed it happen?

The resource parent. This was captured on the home security camera.

What are the specific actions or behaviors this person(s) is doing to violate or not meet your rights? Are there concrete examples?

I was excluded from dinner that night in March and didn't get food because I was grounded by the resource parent. I need to eat and have a right to safety and inclusion.

When did the violation of rights occur? Is it something that is still actively happening?



This happens each time I get detention in school including every Thursday in March when I skipped gym.

Where did/does the violation of rights occur? Does it happen within your home/placement or another specific setting(s)?

In the resource parent home only.

What have your efforts looked like to advocate for yourself? Have you experienced dismissal, retaliation, or resistance to your needs?

I've told the resource family I'm hungry after school and they say I won't starve till breakfast. If I yell, they take away my phone.

Practice Self Advocacy

Developing strong self-advocacy skills takes time. You can practice in small and large situations with someone you trust. Try practicing with a friend/ trusted partner by thinking about current scenarios.



Together, consider “how would I advocate for myself?” or “what could I say?” Write down who that friend/trusted partner could be, pick a current event, and apply these questions.

I could talk to my caseworker about asking to attend court where the judge hears updates on my foster care case even though my caseworker said in the past I am too young. I can tell them I am older now, I can show them my Bill of Rights, and tell them about the experiences other foster kids shared about going to court themselves in our youth advocacy board meeting.

Step 4: Ensuring Accountability and Exercising Your Rights

Identify Your Pathway for Reporting

Your array of reporting options includes social services options (direct discussion with your caregiver, social worker, or social worker’s supervisor) and legal options (reporting to your attorney, within a court proceeding, reporting through a state/jurisdictional ombuds office, or requesting your attorney file a motion). When deciding who to advocate with regarding a violation of your rights, it can be difficult to navigate the system and who to talk to.

Who might you initially go to with your concern?

My attorney.

What are the pros/ benefits of working with this person?

They are legally expected to represent me, they know the laws, and they see me in person every month.



What are the cons/ drawbacks of working with this person?

They're really busy and don't always answer my texts.

How do I access this person?

Next time they visit me, I can review this guide with them. I can also ask them the best way to reach them, and who I should contact next if they do not respond.

Go “Up the Chain” to Ensure Accountability

Just because one person says “no” does not mean the fight for advocating for your rights is over. Getting your rights met often means going “up the chain” to ensure multiple perspectives and levels of authority are involved in assessing whether your rights have been violated or not met. For example, if you can't get ahold of your case manager or attorney, call their office or Google their name and agency and “supervisor” or “manager.” This information can sometimes also be found in their out of office automatic email message or on their voicemail.

Who else might you go to in addition to your first attempt to reconcile your rights? How would you find their information?



My caseworker emailed me and their signature says the days they will be out of office and gives their supervisor's name and number. I could call the supervisor at that number and send an email to the address I found on the Child Protective Services website.

Putting This Guide To Use

Any plan you make is only going to work if you implement. Now that you've created your plan, consider the below to make sure you're ready to take action!

When will I contact the support people I've listed?

Tuesday when I see them for our monthly check in.

What information do I still need? And how do I get it?

I still need to list out the legal terms I didn't understand from the court report I reviewed. I can talk with my attorney when I see them next week.

What barriers could I experience implementing my plan? And what can I do to prevent that or address it?



I've tried advocating in the past and no one listened so I ran away. I could try writing a letter for the judge to read instead of speaking in a court hearing because it made me nervous.

Notes:

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