

"Science is my hardest subject. My aunt encouraged me. She told me that she knew I could try harder and as long as I tried hard, she could accept that. I worked hard at my science class and got a B."

"I trust [my foster parents]. They keep their promises; they are solid and consistent people. Kids should be able to trust their foster parents."

"I've been going to my counselor for seven years. Whenever I have problems I talk to her. She gives me advice on how to keep out of trouble, and she has been helping me prepare for [the] Casey [program], telling me about the questions they might ask me."

"I waited four years to get my Lego set. I was fascinated with the motors and the fiber-optics system. It had lights that go on and off, and a crane that goes up and down. I had a subscription for a Lego magazine, and I used to dream of what I would get. When I went into foster care, my foster dad gave me a job as a general contractor's helper—working for him! I earned \$4 an hour, and he taught me how to hammer nails, do demolitions and set-ups, clean up, and all sorts of things. My Lego set cost \$158 so [gets out his calculator], let's see, I worked about 39.5 hours to get enough money."

Having opportunities to discover and develop my potential.

"Change the perception of foster care. It's not a bad thing. Foster care can be a good opportunity for people. I wouldn't be running or playing soccer if I were with my mom."

"I wish I could get into [the] Casey [program]. They help you with college, and they have groups and activities."

"Last month, in my sixth period, the teacher handed me an envelope, and it was a letter from the US Track and Field Association inviting me on a trip of student athletes to China. There will be a 5K race and a 10K race in Beijing on New Year's Day with over 10,000 runners. The trip costs \$2000. When I got home and showed [my foster mom] the invitation, she was really excited and is trying to help me put the trip together and work on ways to get the money for the trip. I started running cross-country just to stay in shape for soccer, but found that I really like it."

"I got a summer job, my first job. I've always wanted a job, and I've always wanted to work with kids. My foster dad helped me fill out all the forms and took me to the orientation and other classes I had to do. My [Independent Living Program] case manager also helped set it up. I was the first person they called to offer me a job! I was a counselor in training over the summer, and next year I will be a counselor! I did really good. Usually people only become counselors after two years. This might lead to other jobs, and I'm really glad I did it."

"I wanted to be in football, and my [foster] dad helped me so I could do it. He said anything I needed, he would help me with it. I knew I would have to practice a lot. I told myself to just do my best and try to get it. It was hard. There were so many other fast kids. But I had a lot of help. My PE teacher helped, my coach, and my friends. My PE teacher let me run laps during PE so I could catch up on my speed and stay there. My coach let me stay after practice, and he helped me with my passing, blocking and my speed. My [foster] dad picks me up because I miss the bus since I stay so late after school. He picks me up, and he helps coach me, and just helps me."

"Last year I was on the sixth grade track team. I really wanted to break the 200 meter Spring record. In the last meet of the season, I broke the record for the whole district by one-tenth of a second. My final time was 27.2. I wouldn't have played sports if I didn't come [to this foster home.] I love playing sports. The [foster] family cheered me a lot, and my foster brother helped me lift weights and run to get ready to break the record."

"In seventh grade, I ran for [student body] president. I wasn't popular and didn't have a lot of friends, but decided I wanted to run. The first thing I had to do was to get 200 signatures to get on the ballot. I got the signatures, and then I made up banners, cards and gave out stickers to get the votes. I wrote a speech, which was approved, and gave it to the student body. Everyone respected my speech, and I met a lot of people. I lost by four votes out of 750. So I felt good about how I did. I had the strength to overcome the fear of not being popular and took a risk to be what I wanted to be."

"I've been dancing ever since I was little—I was always dancing. The summer I moved [to this foster home], my mentor asked me what activity I would like to get involved with. I told him I wanted to do dancing, so we went and signed up. I joined this dance group—a performing drill team at the community center."

"I made the varsity basketball team in seventh and eighth grade. In seventh grade, I didn't think I would make the team; about 20 kids tried out and a lot of them were eighth graders. I hustled and played as hard as I could and made the team. Our coach was good. My aunt went to a lot of our games and encouraged me."

Second theme: feeling cared about.

Third theme: feeling

Having opportunities to discover and develop my potential. *(continued)*

"I'm doing cross-country for the first time. I didn't even really know what it was. I run cross-country—and when the pressure is on—I step myself up. I meet the competition. I keep beating the guys that are ahead of me. I keep getting better. I strive to do better. I keep up my motivation and enthusiasm. My [foster] parents help too. They come to some of the games, and they help with transportation."

"The first day of football practice, the coach was teaching everyone how to run plays. We were all running around doing exercises. We did this for three days after. This is the first time I ever played tackle football. It's been great. It opened a door. You could find out how fast you are. I work at learning the plays, and can diagram plays like the coach does. The coach would tell you that you did a good job. He helps us to get it right. I made the first tackle in the game Thursday. My foster parents came to the first game."

"I told my caseworker and [foster parent] that I wanted to go to cheer-leading classes. They weren't sure about it, but they went and checked out the people who were teaching the class, and then decided that I could take the classes. I had a lot of fun and learned to do cartwheels, and we made pyramids."

"At church we have a choir, and I am with that choir. I sang in front of a whole bunch of people. In Yakima, I sang at the Foster Care conference. I gave a speech and sang there."

"During track last year, we had overnight trips to Spokane and Cashmere, and I really wanted to get to go, but needed permission from the State. So [my foster mom] talked to my caseworker for me and handled stuff so I could go. I went to the state meet last year in track. I work out and jog every day. I want to play football for UNC; it's my goal."

"I signed up for Explorer Cadet to be a cop. I took the test to go to the academy and made it. I go twice a year to training at Fort Lewis and Yakima. I get to go on shift with the local police and can go out on non-dangerous calls with them. I got my social worker to pay for my cadet training, my books, clothes and equipment. I just had to give her a list of what I needed and prices."

What matters most? Feeling like my opinions matter.

Young people said that success in foster care occurs when they feel like adults listen to and respect their opinions. They describe success primarily in terms of feeling that they are able to influence what is happening to them. This seems to be particularly important to young people in foster care because decisions about their lives are often made by a cadre of adults with varying degrees of interest in or familiarity with their individual needs and interests.

"It's easier to get along when I'm given more respect and trust."

"My foster parents trusted me from day one. They showed me the bedroom upstairs, but when I said I wanted to sleep downstairs they didn't say, 'Why, so you can run?'"

"Listen to what kids have to say and look at things from their point of view."

"If kids want to do something that is healthy, let them do it. Let them have a say and support their interests."

"They shouldn't force kids to visit their parents if they don't want to."

"My foster parents have a second house in Ocean Shores, and they thought about moving there. [My foster mom] asked me if it was okay with me if we moved and, if it was, she told me to give her five reasons why it would be good to move to Ocean Shores. Before, my mom moved all the time, and I never had any input. I had to change schools every year. [My foster mom] wanted everyone on board if we decide to move."

like my opinions matter.

“There was a case planning with my caseworker, counselor and parents, and [my foster mom] was there. They were saying things that I didn’t want to happen and made me feel like my opinion didn’t matter. They were saying things like I was irresponsible and manipulative. I was trying to say something, but no one was listening, and I thought I had thought of something really good to say. [My foster mom] got up and leaned over the table and told everyone to stop and listen—that [I] had something to say. I told them that staying at [my foster mom’s] was the best placement, that it was structured and that it was better than staying with a single, male bachelor, and that if they moved me it would set me back, and I would get angry. Everyone was surprised that I said anything because I rarely spoke. I thought no one would listen.”

“I really wanted to leave my [previous] foster home. I wanted to move because I knew it would never work out. My foster mother would not get help. My counselor would come to our house and ask her to participate in counseling or go to a support group, but my foster mother didn’t think she needed it. I would talk to my counselor about it, and she talked to my caseworker. My caseworker said they would only move me if my counselor recommended it. Then my counselor talked to my foster mom about it but she didn’t want to give up the guardianship. So I talked to my counselor some more and she put in her reports that it would be better for me to move. She let me write a letter to [my DCFS caseworker and his supervisor.] They used the letter in court and I got what I wanted. My sisters are happy that I am happy in a new home.”

“Something I really wanted was to get out of my old foster home and guardianship. I didn’t get on well with my foster mother. It just wasn’t working out. I had wanted to get out of there for a year or two. My foster mom was 63. I called her grandma because she said I had to—all the kids had to call her mom or grandma—but I didn’t like it. I complained to my counselor at school, and I kept bugging [my caseworker]. My foster mom didn’t want to give up the guardianship, but then she said she didn’t know how much longer she could take me. [My caseworker] arranged for me to meet [my current foster parents.] I was scared at first, but we all got along as soon as we met. I visited with [my current foster parents] a few times, and then I came to live here. I’m very happy here.”

“[My guardian] really helped me to get off my meds. I was on a bunch of different meds since I was about four years old, for ADD, ADHD, and the meds had lots of side effects. Like I would get migraines and an upset stomach. I had been asking for years to go off the meds, and no one listened to me. They would just change my prescription. But the side effects never went away. At first, [my guardian] told me I had to take my meds, but then he supported me and told the caseworker and everyone else to take me off my meds, which they did. It was kind of cool that he stood up for me. I’ve been off my meds now for six or seven months.”

“I wanted to change schools, and everyone said it wouldn’t happen. I finally asked my case manager, and she went to school with me. I did most of it myself, but she cared and came with me. I got a waiver and went to the school I wanted to go to.”

“If I have a problem, my sister and brother-in-law are there for me. They try to see it from my point of view. They get both mine and my foster mother’s point of view—and don’t totally disregard my point of view. They take my questions seriously and respect my ideas. If I feel upset, I know I can talk to them and be listened to.”

“They stopped my mental health treatment because someone stopped payment, so I’m going to have to get a new therapist, and I don’t want a new therapist. I like the one I have now. My foster mother is going to try to get it fixed so I can still see her.”

2. This process also reinforced our pre-existing belief that foster care should be temporary, and that what young people need most is a family to call their own. The Ombudsman therefore strongly supports ongoing efforts to: prevent the need for young people's entry into foster care; expedite decisions about the future of those who must be placed in foster care, and; ensure that those young people who cannot be reunified with their birth family are provided with an alternative permanent family. To this end, the Families for Kids Partnership has developed and is working to implement the Washington Permanency Framework, a five-year plan for improving policy and practice to ensure that all children in foster care have permanent families. For more information about the Washington Permanency Framework, contact Families for Kids Partnership, (206) 695-3238, www.FFKPartnership.org.

3. The topics to be studied at an Appreciative Summit could include those developed for this project. Moreover, they could be expanded to address those experiences that the young people interviewed by the Ombudsman said they wished could be improved. See: *Young peoples' ideas for improving their experience in foster care on page 14*.

Findings—The Ombudsman found the appreciative interview process to be a powerful and rewarding experience. Our images of young people in foster care shifted subtly during these interviews. We came out of the process with a renewed sense of their individuality, vulnerability, resilience, and awareness. We also experienced a heightened appreciation of foster parents' contributions to the well being of the young people in their care. Further, we were moved and surprised by the young people's interview responses; specifically, by the utter simplicity of their best experiences and wishes, and by the unexpected commonalities and coherence in what they said matters most to them. Finally, the Ombudsman was left feeling energized and hopeful about the possibility of improving young people's experience in foster care. The Ombudsman has concluded that the successes discovered through this process could be replicated and expanded throughout the system if sufficient attention and energy were devoted to such an effort.²

The Ombudsman has developed a single recommendation aimed at enhancing young people's positive experiences while they are in foster care.

Recommendation—The Children's Administration should focus concerted attention, energy and resources on identifying, replicating and enhancing the positive experiences of young people in foster care. Consideration should be given to bringing together a large cross-section of key participants in the foster care system, including young people, public and private-agency leaders and case-workers, foster parents, and guardians ad litem, in an "Appreciative Summit." The purpose of the Summit would be to engage participants in a mutual discovery of what's working best in the foster care system and design specific ways to replicate and amplify these successes throughout the system. Bringing the "whole system into the room" for this purpose not only would generate new possibilities for action, but also would inspire an unprecedented level of trust and commitment to carrying out those actions on behalf of young people.³

Appreciative Inquiry is being used in a variety of systems and organizations throughout the world to accomplish large-scale positive system change. Those employing this approach include private corporations, non-profit organizations, grass roots initiatives and federal and state government agencies. For example, the Washington State Utilities and Transportation Commission (UTC) earlier this year initiated an Appreciative Inquiry process aimed at helping that agency improve the recruitment, satisfaction and retention of its employees. The child welfare system is in great need of a positive change intervention like Appreciative Inquiry. Washington State could serve as a national leader by bringing this innovative approach to the field of child welfare.

An Appreciative Summit would help generate the energy and momentum necessary for achieving powerful and long-lasting change. According to two of the founding practitioners of this method, David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, the Appreciative Inquiry Summit: *"brings out the best in people, it facilitates the 'whole story' coming together and it inspires highly committed actions on behalf of the whole. Since the inception of The Appreciative Inquiry Summit...we have watched, over and over again, tension turn to enthusiasm, cynicism to collaboration and apathy to inspired action."*⁴

4. Whitney, D., and Cooperrider, D., The Appreciative Inquiry Summit: An Emerging Methodology for Whole System Positive change, OD Practitioner: *Journal of the Organizational Development Network*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2000), pp. 13-26.

Reactions from people who have participated in Appreciative Summits.

- "It evokes trust."
- "It lets people see and experience a purpose greater than their own or their department's."
- "You get a sense that you are connected to a goodness that comes from the power of the whole. You realize you really need each other."
- "It establishes credibility in the outcomes. When everyone is part of the decision you know it will stick."
- "New norms form quickly. You start to value relationships and getting the whole story."
- "People transcend the 'I' and become a 'we.' What's common becomes apparent."
- "It eliminates false assumptions about other people and other groups. When you get to know someone you realize they aren't exactly what you imagined them to be. You develop compassion for different people instead of judgments."

Young people's response to the Ombudsman Appreciative Interviews.

- "I think it's best to get ideas from kids by talking to them—like you are talking to me. I don't really like talking in a group because I'm afraid to talk in groups."
- "I like that you are talking to kids. Adults need to take the time to talk to kids and find out what's happening with them. To get ideas from kids—it would be good to talk to them like you are."
- "I think it would be best to get ideas from foster kids by having these interviews."
- "How to improve foster care? By asking us. Bring kids in to be interviewed. See if they like foster care. The caseworker could ask kids what could be better."
- "I'd interview kids. I know you can't interview everyone in the whole state, but maybe half."
- "Go and ask kids what they need, like this."
- "It would be best to get ideas from kids by coming and talking to them one on one."

Young peoples' ideas to improve foster care.

The Ombudsman interview protocol included two questions that were designed to elicit young people's wishes and ideas for improving their experience in foster care. Their answers focused on three main areas: transitions into new homes; communication with adults; and participation in ordinary activities.

1 Transitions into a new foster home.

"When a kid first comes into foster care, they should be given a stuffed animal or a toy or something, because they don't have anything with them except the clothes on their back. That's what happened to me—I got to pick out a stuffed animal. I still have it."

"Have stuff ready for the kids ahead of time so when they get [to their new foster home] there are things for them to do -like a play station, TV or boom box. Have a loving family to greet them."

"Caseworkers should give kids information about the foster home they are going to. They should have us meet the foster parents before we get placed there, and let us get to ask them questions with our social worker there, before we just get taken there. That is the scariest part of foster care, when you don't know where you are going or anything about the people you are going to."

"Caseworkers should help kids get adjusted to a new [foster] home—they shouldn't just put them in a new home and leave them there. They should come and visit to see how you are doing, or at least call. It's scary going to a new home."

"Make sure the child likes the [foster] home. Don't just put them there and say 'It's good just because the state and the foster family says it's OK.'"

"I would ask foster kids, do they like the foster mom? Are they doing OK?"

2 Communication with adults.

"I think caseworkers should explain more to kids about what's going to happen to them. When I got removed, the cops came, my mom was crying and then I was in a different home. Just talk to the kids more. I e-mail my caseworker a lot."

"When the police came to our house with two ladies to take us away, they said, 'Just grab enough stuff for three days, and you'll come home in three days.' I think they should not have told us that because we didn't come back."

"I think caseworkers should tell kids what the foster parents can and can't do. Some foster parents say it's OK for them to hit kids as long as they don't leave a bruise. My [previous] foster mom would say that when she hit me. I did tell my counselor she was hitting me and my counselor told me it's not OK but I wish I would have known sooner."

"I think foster kids need a direct way to communicate to be heard. Kids should be able to talk to one adult, who should have a meeting with the kids. Or they could have younger kids talk to older kids and the older kids could talk to caseworkers."

"Caseworkers should talk to kids more. My caseworker hardly ever talks to me. They rely too much on counselors and foster parents to talk to us. They should find out how we are doing directly from us."

"Foster kids should be able to e-mail their caseworkers and they should have to e-mail us back."

"I think caseworkers make judgments about what's best for us without asking us what we want. Caseworkers sometimes say they know how you feel, when how can they know? They should be like you [the interviewer], just asking questions and accepting our answers."

"I think caseworkers and GALs (guardians ad litem) forget about kids after a while. My caseworker hasn't called me once since I have been here, except to ask me to do this interview. My GAL has never called me."

"Keep promises! I was told that I would get to stay with my brother. Lie. I was told that I would get to stay in my first foster home. Lie."

"There are some really weird foster parents out there. I think kids need to have somebody on the outside like [the Ombudsman] to talk to, not the caseworker. I might not want to tell my caseworker something because she might get mad or hold a grudge."

3 Participating in ordinary activities.

Staying overnight at a friend's house.

"I wish I didn't always have to get permission from the state to be able to stay overnight at a friend's house."

"The guardianship took me out of the agency system. With the guardianship, I have more freedom. I can go over to a friend's house, or have a friend come over to my house without having to wait for a background check. Those decisions are left up to [my guardian] and me."

"Foster children should be able to spend the night over at a friend's house without everybody having to get background checks."

"The system is too afraid of what might happen that it can't trust itself. Like getting background clearances and criminal background checks just to stay over at a friend's house or have a friend over at my house."

"The system should make exceptions to all the rules for kids that don't need the rules. Like with the background checks before you can stay over at a friend's house. I never stay overnight at my friend's. I just tell them that I can come to their party but I can't stay over night."

Getting a driver's license.

"They should change the law that says foster kids can't get a driver's license until they are 18, unless the foster parents can put them on their insurance. This is not fair on the foster parents or the kids. This does not give foster kids a chance to be like other kids."

"They should help foster kids get their driver's license. I would like to be able to drive to my appointments, as now I have to take the bus and since it only runs out here every hour, I have to leave for my appointments an hour and a half ahead of time. Foster kids should be able to drive at 16 with an adult in the car, at least for a probation period until they think we can drive alone."

"I wish I could drive when I'm 16. Pass a bill so foster kids can drive, if you have good grades and are doing OK. We should be able to take risks like every kid."

"Foster children shouldn't be punished for one child's mistake. One [foster] kid got in a car wreck... now no foster child can take driver's ed until they are 18."

Buying new clothes.

"I wish kids could get checks for clothes, like \$50 a month or something. I like to have new clothes, but my foster mom can't afford it, and I don't like to ask her for a lot of money."

"Kids should get more clothes than once a year. My foster parents give me money and help me. I bought my last pair of shoes myself. Clothes vouchers don't pay for hardly anything. They don't even pay for underwear—just a pair of pants and a couple of shirts."

"I think foster kids should get a small amount of money per month for themselves. Sometimes the foster parents don't give the kids an allowance. I know it can't be a big amount, and it should be based on the kid's age and their behavior. Older kids like me could get about \$75 just to get some of the things they need."

"If I were an adult trying to help the foster care system, I would do fund raising to help foster care programs. Then I would work with the foster parents and foster child directly with clothing, books and sports equipment that the foster child needed. I would tell the foster child that there was a money limit that could be spent, but if he needed new football cleats, books, clothes, etc., he could buy them."

"I wish I could get an allowance. I always need money—for things like going to the movies, going bowling, buying shoes or earrings. I have been sitting around here with not a lot to do because I don't have any money to do stuff like that."

The young people interviewed by the Ombudsman.

The 32 young people whom the Ombudsman interviewed as part of its Foster Youth Appreciative Inquiry Project were selected with the assistance of DCFS and private agency caseworkers. The Ombudsman contacted DCFS and agency staff to help identify young people on their caseloads with the demographic characteristics sought by the Ombudsman. Each young person agreed to be interviewed after reviewing information about the purpose and nature of the project. Ombudsman staff (and one contracted interviewer) conducted individual interviews at or nearby the young person's foster home.

Interview Participants

Sex:

Female: 17
 Male: 15

Age:

11-12 5
 13-14 12
 15-16 13
 17 2

Race:

Caucasian 22
 African American 6
 Asian 2
 Biracial (including
 Native American) 2

Ethnicity:

Non-Hispanic 25
 Hispanic 7

Cumulative Years in Out of Home Placement:

1-2 yrs 1
 3-4 yrs 7
 5-6 yrs 6
 7-8 yrs 6
 9+ yrs 2

Number of (Non-Respite) Placements:

1-2 15
 3-4 6
 5-6 5
 7-8 3
 9+ 3

Current Placement Information:

Placement Licensed By:
 DSHS 23
 Private Agency 9

Placement Type:

Non-Relative or Kinship 30
 Relative/Kinship 2

Geographic Location:

Region 1 5
 Region 2 5
 Region 3 5
 Region 4 9
 Region 5 5
 Region 6 3

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