



Iowa Children's Justice

November 2011

Engaging Youth in the Court Process and Benchmark Hearings for Youth Transition

November Topic

Young people need to be full partners and leaders in understanding their rights and responsibilities and in making decisions affecting their own lives. Developing a transition plan in partnership with a wide array of adults from various public and private systems is important, but most importantly, young people need to lead the process of making decisions on issues that affect them in order to support their successful transition to adulthood.

Iowa's Blueprint, April 2010

Engaging Youth in the Court Process

The Iowa Blueprint for Forever Families can be found at Iowa Children's Justice Webpage:
http://www.iowacourts.gov/Administration/Childrens_Justice/Childrens_Justice/index.asp

What Do Youth Say about Court.....

"Every time I'd go to court, the judge made me feel welcome. After each person would talk in court she would ask me, '[name] is there anything you want to say?' I had the floor. She would ask me if I agreed or disagreed with recommendations. She would give me feedback on what I said and was very honest about what she thought and would share it with me. She would explain anything I didn't understand. She was really patient and kind. She was amazing. When I was going to be done with court she said 'you better come and see me.'"

Examples of Judges Engaging Youth in a Meaningful Court Process

"The judge really encouraged me – took an interest in my life. He was very happy for all the positive decisions I made in my life. I think at almost every court hearing, he directly asked me about my foster home and school and it felt more like a conversation than court hearing. My GAL went to my graduation party and the judge sent me a card."

"I had a good experience with court. It went really well. I was lucky because I had a really good judge. She was really good about listening to what I had to say and taking it into consideration. I always felt she had my best interest at heart. I remember, after each court date, she would let us pick a beanie baby or something like that out of a box or let us pick a book from her shelf. That was really cool."

"Social workers change. CASA workers change....but I had the same Judge and the same GAL the whole seven years I went to court. That consistency makes a difference, so I never had to transition to anyone else. They knew my whole case. I think the judge and my GAL really focused on what I wanted and they really cared about my voice being heard."

The judge made sure I was invited to court. My GAL changed a lot, but I had the same judge the whole time. With the same judge, I did have a sense of trust... It was a big comfort. When I was adopted as an adult, I asked for him to do the adoption and he was really pleased. . When you move around a lot it's great to have someone with that amount of power in your corner."

I think it's important for younger kids to go to court but it is also important to prepare them; be supportive for them. I think children of all ages need to have a voice about what happens in their life.

Interviews
Conducted with
Iowa Youth
August 2011

What can judges do to engage youth in the court process?

- Assure that everyone understands that all young people will participate in decisions affecting them;
- Set clear expectation, and assure everyone in the courtroom approaches the young person with respect and understanding;
- Present information in a way that young people understand;
- Ask young people their ideas and rationale from the bench; and
- Evaluate practices to assure that those who work with young people are doing a good job.

DHS Strategies for Engaging and Transitioning Youth

Youth Centered Practice: Youth centered practice and engagement, and transition planning meetings [Dream Teams] have been implemented by DHS for older youth in foster care and youth transitioning out of foster care. This means youth are engaged in making decisions about their lives, involves youth in planning, and encourages youth to speak up for themselves. Youth centered practice includes services and supports to help youth prepare for adulthood and plan for that event. Youth engagement encourages youth to participate in meaningful court hearings. Dream teams are a form of planning meeting that gathers a supportive team of adults and peers to help youth plan and make connections to resources, education, employment, health care, housing, and supportive personal and community relationships. Through these connections and relationships, youth are better able to access and take advantage of the resources, knowledge, and skills to support themselves as they reach adulthood.

Judges' contribution to Helping Youth Transition to Adulthood

Benchmark Hearings: A benchmark hearing helps youth prepare for transition to adulthood. This special type of hearing considers what youth know and are able to do now, what they will need to have ready to transition to an adult, and how others can help them get the skills, knowledge and abilities to be successful. Attention must also be given to helping youth prepare to live independently as an adult. Attention is given to youth having normal growing up experiences, such as getting a driver's license, holding a part-time job, applying to college, and opening a bank account.

Benchmark Hearings

An important part of transitioning is identifying community and individual supports youth will need. Supports youth may need include:

- **life skills assessment and training:** learning how to take care of themselves and manage life requirements as an adult
- **vocational and career planning:** learning how to go to college or get and keep a good job
- **health care:** learning how to manage preventative care and take care of medical needs
- **counseling:** learning how to stay emotionally balanced and healthy and seek support when needed
- identification of **federal benefits** and other public assistance available for the teen: seeking financial help until they are able to get a good job
- **housing:** finding and keeping a safe place to live
- **special needs:** help and support to assist the youth with any special needs,
- help to figure out the current relationship with their **birth family** and how to maintain healthy relationships with them as they reach adulthood.

Participants at the Benchmark Hearing are selected by the youth. Also included are the youth's social worker, the county attorney, and the GAL. Other participants may include individuals able to provide pertinent information about school, medical or vocational needs.

For more information about the Blueprint

The Iowa Blueprint for Forever Families can be found at Iowa Children's Justice Webpage:

http://www.iowacourts.gov/Administration/Childrens_Justice/Childrens_Justice/index.asp

The Permanency Summit materials can be found at:

http://www.iowacourts.gov/Administration/Childrens_Justice/Childrens_Justice/Permanency_Summit/

For more information about Iowa Children's Justice

For more information about Children's Justice or this newsletter, contact Gail Barber, Director, at gail.barber@iowacourts.gov.

This e-letter may be forwarded to others you think might be interested. If you would like to add someone to our mailing list, please send their email address to krys.lange@iowacourts.gov

If you would prefer not to receive this newsletter, please let us know at krys.lange@iowacourts.gov
