

# Success In School For Children and Youth In Care

## Tips For Helping Young People To Advocate For Themselves

Decisions that directly affect children and youth in provincial government care are made through the core team, which includes caseworkers, caregivers, a school point person, the classroom teacher, the student and any other guardian of the student. As these decisions are being made, it is important for a child or youth in care to be able to advocate on their own behalf by expressing their perceptions, preferences, concerns, and opinions.

Assisting children and youth in care to self-advocate in educational or other settings is important. While there are many reasons why this is so, there are two reasons that stand out.

The first is that including the young person's input leads to better decisions, which have a greater likelihood of being successful. No one else has as complete or direct knowledge of the young person's history, including their successes and failures, worries and concerns, or hopes and aspirations, as they do themselves. These are all important considerations that can inform decisions. In addition, the young person's participation in arriving at a decision, even if it is an outcome with which they disagree, increases the chances of them supporting the process.

Secondly, involving youth in decision-making enhances the maturity and development of the young person. The ability to make responsible decisions is a gradual and learned process that takes time and practice. Most youth in family settings have regular and gradual experiences in which they can practice decision-making and taking on additional responsibility for self-determination as their capacity develops. This natural process is often hindered for youth in care. Not only do many of these young people have disadvantages that interfere with the process of maturation, they often perceive the child intervention and/or education systems as unfriendly, intrusive and disempowering. To counteract these effects, it is important to provide youth in care with structured, supported occasions to participate in and practice decision-making.



## Youth in Care Say...

■ *“Please make decisions with me when you can; that is MY life in that file folder. I might not always like the decisions you make, even when they are for my safety, but the more involved I am and the more control I have, the better I will feel.”*

■ **“My Voice,” a poem by Grace-Anne Timmins**

*My voice is a powerful wave  
That crashes through cities and towns  
It is a ray of sunshine That breaks through  
darkness It isn't always spoken It can  
be written, or shown through a facial  
expression My voice provides leadership,  
A comforting home for those who feel  
misunderstood Or a place for people to  
disagree with me No one can shake it from  
me No one can make me stop using it This  
is my opinion, expression, emotion and  
experience You can ignore it if you like  
But you will never be able to mute it*

<http://www.youthnewsletter.net/pdf/YICNewsletter2009.pdf>



## How Can I Support Educational Success for Young People in Care?

- Give the young person a clear message that you support him, and that he has the right to be heard. Work with the young person to identify other support persons who can also help him.
- Advise the young person that it is alright for her to ask to have a support person in the core team meeting or other decision-making forums, and help the young person decide who she might like this to be.
- Support the young person in focusing on his strengths, abilities and resources in being able to help himself and overcome obstacles.
- Help the young person to see decision-making as a process and not a onetime event.
- Inform the young person of the process for making, influencing and appealing decisions.
- Encourage her not to give up if she is unhappy with a decision.
- Explain to the young person that in some instances, he has a right and responsibility to participate in the decision-making process, but may not have a right to decide.
- Assist the young person in developing her thoughts about what she wants, and the reasons why. It might help her to put it in writing to organize her thoughts.
- Offer to assist the young person to see the consequences of what he is asking for and if asked, provide your opinion. Be careful not to override the young person or to pressure him to accept your views.
- Do not do anything in public to undermine or discount the young person's wishes or desires. Speak with her in private if you feel she really needs to reconsider her views.
- Offer to role play what the young person wants to say. You can model by first taking the role of the youth and then give him the chance to practice.
- Help the young person anticipate how she would respond or what she might say if the adults do not understand or disagree with her requests.
- Help the young person anticipate that he may be asked to compromise, which is part of responsible decision-making. Assist the young person to identify if there are some aspects of his desires or wishes he would give up or change, and under what conditions.
- Model and coach these strategies with other adults who work with young people to build their capacity to assist young people in care with effective self-advocacy.