



Tips for TPP Grantees Serving Youth in Foster Care and Congregate Care

From February through April 2024, several Teen Pregnancy Prevention (TPP) Program grantees from across tiers assembled in three affinity group sessions to share and discuss experiences, challenges, and successes with serving youth in foster care and congregate care.

This resource captures high-level tips, along with specific strategies, shared by affinity group participants. These tips and strategies are relevant for all grantees implementing programs in partnership with foster care or congregate care organizations. Grantees should consult their OPA project officers and grantee liaisons about how to apply these tips to their specific programs.

The tips are:

1. [Be intentional with language](#)
2. [Talk with staff and youth before implementation](#)
3. [Gather information to optimize implementation](#)
4. [Provide incentives for program participation](#)
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Tip #1: Be intentional with language

- **Avoid labeling youth.** Youth who live with relatives who are not their parents may not identify as foster care participants. Integrate a client-centered approach; aim to acknowledge the unique situations of youth in foster care and congregate care while also avoiding tokenism.
- **Opt for “caregiver” (not “parent”).** Some youth may think of their caregivers as parents while others may not.

Tip #2: Talk with staff and youth before implementation

Staff

Walk implementation setting staff through the curriculum and invite them to share thoughts, considerations, concerns, and ideas. This may sound like:

- What should we know about the youth you serve?

- Thinking about the supplies needed to deliver the curriculum, what might you have available on site and what should we bring?
- Based on your experience, what recruitment strategies do you think might be effective for this program with these particular youth?

Youth

Connecting with youth in your implementation setting before your program begins can help you engage youth, empower their voices, build trust, and ensure their preferences are reflected in program delivery.

- **Ask what they want to discuss.** This may sound like, “What topics are important to you that you would like covered in this program?” Consider asking specifically about topics they want to discuss with caregivers and how they want to engage on these topics. You can also use surveys or previous observations of youth to inform your understanding of what they want to discuss.
- **Learn how you can remove barriers to participation.** This may sound like, “What would make it easier for you and other youth with similar experiences to participate in our program?” and “Where would you prefer to hold our sessions?”
- **Break the ice.** To foster familiarity and rapport, consider engaging with youth in ways unrelated to your evidence-based program (EBP)—for example, by creating an affirmation station or handing out stickers.
- **Create space for their questions.** This may sound like, “What questions would you like to ask me at this moment?”

Keep in mind: Even though some youth suggestions might seem unimportant or unrelated to your objectives, take them seriously. Do what you can to incorporate their input while also ensuring that your approach remains aligned with your program goals and objectives and your curriculum requirements.

Tip #3: Gather information to optimize implementation

It’s important to take into account youth and partners’ needs, preferences, and challenges before you launch into implementation. Leverage the conversations with staff and youth to:

- **Understand the challenges unique to youth in foster care and congregate care.** These youth may be more likely to: feel triggered, need transportation assistance, need consent from social workers, and have privacy issues with photographs being taken. Congregate care settings may also restrict who can enter the facility. Consider how you will meet these unique needs.
- **Learn about specific implementation barriers and challenges.** For example, you might have a computer-based curriculum but learn that the site has spotty internet or doesn’t have computers. Or you might learn that many of the youth at your site speak

Spanish as their primary language. Once you identify the challenges, you can figure out how to address them.

- **Address barriers using available resources.** For example, you might have resources to help youth with transportation to and from the program or bilingual staff who can assist with EBP implementation for bilingual youth.
- **Assess logistics that work for youth.** For example, determine what days, times, and locations are best for program delivery. If youth identify transportation as a barrier to participating, consider a more convenient location or even virtual sessions.

Tip #4: Provide incentives for program participation

Incentives are a valuable tactic for recruiting youth into your program.

- **Get input from youth on incentives.** They may ask for things like: food, tote bags, speakers, headphones, gift cards (Amazon or Target), [bracelet slinkys](#), blankets, or ring lights (for phone cameras). Listen to their suggestions and determine what you can provide that they might find valuable. If you have an approved list of incentives or limitations on the incentives you can offer, ask them to give input within these parameters.
- **Invite companies to partner.** For example, fast food chains or grocery stores might be willing to provide in-kind donations.
- **Consider a raffle.** A raffle can be exciting and also budget-friendly.
- **Ask caregivers for input on incentives.** Before you make final decisions about the incentives for youth, talk with caregivers to make sure they view the incentives as appropriate and relevant.

Tip #5: Prepare staff for implementation

Training topics and courses

In addition to EBP curriculum training, think about training staff in:

- Sexual health education and facilitation best practices (e.g., [Bringing Content to Life: Techniques for Effective Group Facilitation Video Series](#))
- Values exploration, self-disclosure, answering sensitive questions, and maintaining boundaries
- Medical accuracy, including puberty and sexual and reproductive anatomy (e.g., [Introduction to Sexual and Reproductive Anatomy and Physiology for TPP Project Staff eLearning](#))

- Trauma-informed approaches, including creating safe and supportive environments (e.g., [Understanding Trauma and the Six Core Principles of a Trauma-informed Approach Meeting Package](#))
- Adverse childhood experiences (ACE) training
- Youth mental health (e.g., [Youth Mental Health First Aid](#))
- LGBTQ inclusivity
- Positive youth development
- Consent and healthy relationships
- Cultural responsiveness
- Other topics relevant to the needs of your staff and the youth they serve

Other learning opportunities

- Identify conferences that cover these topics.
- Assign each staff member to learn about a topic and share their learnings with the team.
- Have newer staff learn from seasoned educators through shadowing or co-facilitation.

Tip #6: Understand how trauma can show up in youth

All youth in foster care or congregate care systems have experienced some trauma. Working with youth who have extensive trauma histories, particularly when delivering a program focused on establishing healthy relationships, can be difficult.

It's important for educators to:

- **Focus on connection before correction.** Information without connection won't be absorbed.
- **Know that trauma can lead youth to display challenging behaviors.** Training in trauma-informed approaches is designed to help educators recognize, understand, and respond to trauma.
- **Create an environment where students feel safe and free from judgment.** Creating and referring back to group agreements throughout all sessions can help with this effort.
- **Pay close attention.** This includes paying attention to participants' body language. Be on the lookout for session content that might trigger a participant and comments that provide insight into a participant's trauma (like references to not having a trusted adult in their lives). Notice when calling on a student might be triggering a reaction.
- **Show empathy, compassion, and patience.** Do all you can to meet youth where they are. Gently support them and help them understand what coming out of survival mode could look like for them.

- **Let youth know you care.** Listen to them and let them know that their voices are important. At the same time, understand that connection may be tricky for youth who have previously experienced care from adults as unstable and unreliable.
- **Check in regularly with participants.** Some topics, like negotiation and consent, may be particularly triggering for youth. Observe, ask how they are feeling (when appropriate), and offer breaks when needed. Breaks may also be valuable during information-heavy lessons.
- **Uplift participants' power.** Whenever possible, invite their voices, ask their permission, and offer them choices (even something as small as if they prefer the door open or closed). Instead of instructing participants to do something, use phrases like: "I'd like to invite everyone to..."
- **Build trust with youth.** It's important for youth to trust both the individual educators as well as the organization as a whole. The recommendations above can all help you build trust and a sense of safety. When students feel safe, they are far more likely to engage.
- **Connect youth with other support or services, when appropriate.** You don't need to be an expert in everything a young person may be dealing with; most programs have other staff or relationships with other organizations that can help. Be tactful when you offer this help.

Tip #7: Engage caregivers

Build trust before implementation

Before program implementation begins, create a space for caregivers to learn about your program, ask questions, and build trust. This might look like a:

- Mini training on your program
- Community event that includes youth, like a "Back to School Night"
- Lunch with caregivers and community agencies
- Virtual option along with an in-person option, to accommodate all caregivers

Leverage strategic partnerships

Strategic partnerships can support caregiver engagement. This might look like working with local organizations that:

- Already assist youth in foster care or already serve caregivers
- Could offer caregivers and their families access to desirable community spaces, like parks and recreational facilities, gyms, or cultural centers
- Have programs for youth that could incorporate adolescent health discussions and offer a positive outlet for coping with emotions, like summer camps
- Are passionate about youth and want to make a difference in their lives

Be clear about program content and goals

Caregivers may be skeptical of programs that mention sex, drugs, and violence. To put caregivers at ease, be specific about what these sessions teach, how the content relates to your program's goals (like fostering healthy decision-making or negotiation skills), and how these conversations can help youth and their families in the long run. Partner with an already trusted individual, like a school principal, to increase your credibility.

Involve caregivers in program delivery

- **Be intentional about how and when you involve caregivers.** Think about which activities and materials are appropriate for caregivers only, youth only, or both caregivers and youth together. Keep in mind that simulations can engage and enhance learning for both caregivers and youth.
- **Create a safe, vulnerable, and open space for caregivers.** As a result, caregivers may feel more comfortable sharing their own lived experiences, which can help them connect with youth.
- **Facilitate productive conversations.** As a facilitator, you can support conversations between youth and caregivers by helping them identify and respond appropriately when they face communication or technical barriers, and by creating an empowering space for youth.
- **Implement home-based activities.** Consider facilitating a weekly family meeting or family dinner conversation. This can be a valuable way to review what youth have learned, incorporate teach-backs, and foster sharing and communication.

Use exercises that facilitate understanding and empathy

Certain exercises can help make sensitive topics, like sexual wellness and identity, easier to talk about. For example, the mirroring exercise has caregivers and young people switch roles and say what they always wanted the other to say. When conducting this activity, consider putting a curtain between participants. This can help create a safe space for vulnerability.

Support intergenerational communication

To support communication between youth and older caregivers, like grandparents and grandparent figures, program staff can:

- **Avoid alienating language and behaviors.** Highlighting generational differences (like using “old school” as a negative) can drive a wedge between youth and caregivers.
- **Help “translate.”** When youth do not understand caregivers and caregivers do not understand youth, facilitators can offer to clarify.
- **Host intergenerational events.** These can provide an opportunity for family bonding.

Tip #8: Support youth leadership and voices

Your program will be much more effective when you tap into youth perspectives, foster youth leadership, and build on youth interests.

- **Identify youth who are excited.** These may be current participants whom you can recruit to help motivate participation from their peers or engage other potential leaders. These may also be program alumni who can tell current or potential participants their own experiences in the program and the impact on their lives.
- **Provide leadership opportunities.** Examples include: joining youth leadership councils (for program alumni), participating in peer educator programs, leading teamwork-oriented camping trips, speaking at town halls on topics relevant to their communities, participating in rotary clubs or other leadership events and conferences, and leading other passion projects.
- **Leverage youth input to shape program delivery.** Work with youth to integrate relevant and apt recommendations and, when appropriate, coach youth to help facilitate activities.
- **Compensate youth, when possible.** It can be difficult for youth to find ways to make money. If your organization is able, consider paid summer internships, community service, or other activities that add value to your program or community.
- **Support youth in seeing their ideas through.** Youth who at first show enthusiasm for a passion project may, on their own, eventually lose steam. You play an important role in helping youth translate ideas into action.
- **Involve youth in program delivery.** Even small tweaks can foster engagement and empowerment. For example, invite youth to write on the board or, when tangential topics come up, jot them down in an ideas parking lot and revisit them at the end of the session.
- **Find ways to incorporate young people's interests.** Ask what makes youth excited. Even when their interests seem unrelated to your program, try to think of creative ways to integrate them. This can help spark engagement.
- **Include program alumni.** Alumni are uniquely positioned to offer advice and wisdom to current participants. Consider inviting alumni to talk or asking them to write letters to participants or their younger selves (you can then mine these letters for advice and themes). Letter writing may make sense for programs in congregate care settings, where alumni may not be allowed.

Tip #9: Be cautious when collecting written information

- **Know your state’s laws.** Collecting information about young people’s sexual orientation, sex, gender identity, and race/ethnicity can be legally difficult. Depending on your state, you may not be able to ask these questions on enrollment forms.
- **Consider other ways to collect important information.** If your state restricts what you can ask on enrollment forms, provide other opportunities for youth in your program to share information (e.g., add space on program worksheets where youth can indicate their pronouns).
- **Keep surveys anonymous and confidential.** Surveys are another way to gather demographics as well as data for program improvement. Youth may feel more comfortable and willing to participate if they know their responses won’t be tied to their name.
- **Use existing information when possible.** Ask the implementation site if they have demographic or other information for youth from their enrollment process.

Additional Resources:

- [Youth In Foster Care Webinar Slides](#)
- [Incorporating Social Determinants of Health and Equity in Practice to Address Sexual and Reproductive Health for Young People Involved in Foster Care](#) (Activate)
- [Healthy Sexuality for Youth in Foster Care eLearning](#) (Family and Youth Services Bureau)
- [Bringing Content to Life: Techniques for Effective Group Facilitation Video Series](#)
- [Understanding Trauma and the Six Core Principles of a Trauma-Informed Approach Meeting Package](#)
- [Develop an Elevator Pitch to Engage Caregivers Job Aid](#)
- [Engaging Parents and Caregivers in Programs For Teen Healthy Relationships and Sexual Health Tip Sheet](#)
- [Parent/Caregiver Involvement in Adolescent Care Resources](#)
- [THRIVE Evaluation](#) (THRIVE)
- [Youth Engagement Network](#) (TPP20 Innovation and Impact Network grantee)

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