



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 tips and strategies shared by affinity group participants. While some of these tips focus on congregate care settings, most can be applied to any implementation setting where youth in foster care or congregate care might be participants (for example, schools).

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. Aim to acknowledge the unique situations that youth in foster care and congregate care are in 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?
- Are there any supplies indicated in the curriculum that you don’t have?
- What recruitment strategies do you think might be effective?

Youth

Connecting with youth in your implementation setting before you begin implementation can help you engage youth, empower their voices, build trust, and ensure their preferences are reflected in program delivery. This may sound like:

- What do you want to talk about during the program?
- What would make it easier for you to participate in our program?
- Where would you prefer to hold our sessions?
- Do you have any questions for me?

To break the ice and foster familiarity, consider also engaging with youth in ways unrelated to your

EBP—for example, by creating an affirmation station or handing out stickers.

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:

- **Learn about implementation barriers and challenges.** For example, you might have a computer-based curriculum but learn that the site doesn't have computers. Or you might learn that a large portion 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.
- **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.
- **Address barriers using available resources.** For example, you might have resources to help youth with transportation to and from the program.
- **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.

- **Ask youth what they want.** Examples may include: food, tote bags, speakers, headphones, gift cards (Amazon or Target), [bracelet slinkys](#), blankets, and ring lights (for phone cameras).
- **Invite other companies to partner.** For example, fast food chains or grocery stores might be willing to provide in-kind donations.
- **Make sure incentives are appropriate and relevant for youth.** Consider getting input from caregivers before making final decisions about incentives.
- **Consider a raffle.** A raffle can be exciting and also budget-friendly.

Tip #5: Prepare staff for implementation

Trainings

In addition to EBP curriculum training, think about training staff in: trauma-informed approaches, youth mental health, inclusivity, positive youth development, consent, healthy relationships, and cultural responsiveness.

Consider these specific trainings:

- Best Practices in Teaching Sexual Health Education
- Puberty & the Reproductive System
- Values Exploration, Self-Disclosure, Answering Sensitive Questions & Maintaining Boundaries
- Safe and Supportive Environments
- Positive Youth Development
- Medical Accuracy
- Effectively Facilitate Student Learning
- A Trauma-Informed Approach to Sex Education
- Youth Mental Health First Aid Training and Crisis Training
- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Training
- [Understanding Trauma and Six Core Principles Meeting Package \(RHNTC\)](#)
- [Bringing Content to Life: Techniques for Effective Group Facilitation Video Series \(RHNTC\)](#)

Other learning opportunities

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

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

Most 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:

- **Know that trauma can lead youth to exhibit challenging behaviors.** Training in trauma-informed approaches are designed to help educators recognize, understand, and respond to trauma.
- **Create an environment where students feel safe and free from judgment.** Creating and sticking to group agreements 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 in an effort to foster engagement might be triggering a reaction.
- **Show empathy, compassion, and patience.** Do all you can to meet youth where they are and gently help them understand what coming out of survival mode means 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.** Ask how they are feeling 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. When students feel safe they are far more likely to engage.

Keep in mind: Connection before correction! Information without connection won't be absorbed.

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 drugs and violence. To put caregivers at ease, be specific about what these sessions teach and how the content relates to your program's goals (like fostering healthy decision-making or negotiation skills). Partner with an already trusted individual, like a school principal, to increase your credibility.

Involve caregivers in program delivery

Many programs include caregivers. They often incorporate simulations to 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.
- **Let youth lead.** Give youth the agency to come up with ideas of what to discuss with caregivers and how to engage on these topics. You can also use observations and surveys to assess the topics youth want to discuss. Then plan activities to address these needs.
- **Facilitate productive conversations.** As a facilitator, you can support conversations between youth and caregivers by breaking down communication barriers and technical barriers, and by creating an empowering space for youth.
- **Recommend activities for caregivers to implement at home.** Home-based activities, like a family dinner or planned weekly conversation, 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 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, 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 are not understanding caregivers and caregivers are not understanding youth, facilitators can offer to clarify.
- **Host intergenerational events.** These can provide an opportunity for family bonding.
- It can be helpful to tailor your approach to the different audiences you have, using in-home classes for deeper learning, and larger events spaced out over time.

Tip #8: Support youth leadership and voices

Your program will be that much more effective if 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: youth leadership councils (for program alumni), 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 projects they are passionate about.
- **Pay 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.
- Additionally, investing in staff training and planning to create the necessary steps and support for translating ideas into action can be beneficial. Modeling these practices, along with preparing youth leadership with trauma-informed training being ready to pivot, and emotionally supporting them contribute to fostering a supportive environment.
- **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.
- **Emphasize young people's interests.** Ask what makes them excited and encourage them to follow their ideas. This can help make the content more relevant and spark engagement.

Consider: In settings where alumni are not allowed, ask them to write letters to their younger selves. Then incorporate the advice or themes from these letters into your activities.

Tip #9: Be cautious when collecting written information

- **Keep surveys anonymous and confidential.** Surveys can provide useful 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:

- [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)