# QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF WORKFORCE EXPERT INTERVIEWS

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Interviews were conducted with fifteen child welfare professionals representing nine different states. A framework analysis was conducted to understand how workforce professionals were engaging youth in practice. The most common form of youth engagement in case planning was including youth in permanency team meetings. Youth were most often engaged in relational permanency efforts through conversations to identify family or family-like connections that may be supportive for youth. Child welfare professionals struggled to engage youth in efforts to promote cultural permanency, as there appeared to be limited guidance regarding how to gather information about which aspects of their culture a youth found most important and meaningful. Child welfare professionals supported youth engagement in court by encouraging them to attend and accommodating youth attendance, eliciting information about what youth would like to tell the court, among other strategies.

Youths' level of engagement varied by age. Ages 12, 14, and 16 seemed to be points at which youth were often granted more rights to engage in decisions about their life. Depending on the state and agency, youth's rights to engage in decisions about their future were granted by some combination of state laws, court orders, agency policies, or simply the worker's belief that

the youth was ready to engage in conversations. Of the 15 interviews, five indicated there were state laws or agency policies that gave youth the right to make some decisions related to legal permanency.

The primary barrier to engaging youth overall was a lack of time and resources. Child welfare is an under-resourced field, and overloaded caseworkers are unlikely to have the time required to build trusting relationships, elicit information from youth, and advocate for what they would like their future to look like. Additionally, given the demands of the job, worker turnover was high across the board. High turnover means that even if workers are successful in building a relationship with youth, this progress is erased every time a worker leaves and a new worker is hired. Permanency planning may be interrupted, stalled, or dropped altogether when a worker leaves their position, complicating the planning process.

Child welfare professionals felt that engaging youth was important because it promotes a sense of personal empowerment in youth that often feel they have little or no autonomy. This helps youth cope emotionally while motivating them to effectively partner with their case worker to create a long-term permanency plan. Recommendations to promote youth engagement included worker training and coaching; allowing more time for child welfare professionals to build relationships by reducing caseloads; providing supervision that reinforces the training model; institutionalizing the agency's commitment to youth voice and partnership; creating policies that require youth engagement; providing youth with options and scaffolding; improving worker pay and working conditions; and increasing the number of resources available in the community. The most frequently cited worker skills to support youth engagement were building trusting relationships, communication and listening skills, and preparing and informing youth.

# THE QIC-EY

The Quality Improvement Center on Engaging Youth in Finding Permanency (QIC-EY) is a five-year cooperative agreement funded by the Administration on Children, Youth & Families, Children Bureau. The five partner agencies include Spaulding for Children, the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC), the New England Association of Child Welfare Commissioners and Directors (NEACWCD), the University of Nebraska at Lincoln (UNL), and the University of Washington (UW). Spaulding is the Lead Agency.

The QIC-EY will select 6-8 pilot sites, states, counties, tribal nations and territories, during the first year of the project. Working in partnership with the sites, the QIC-EY will implement and evaluate authentic youth engagement models in the pilot sites and help the sites to make systemic changes necessary for youth engagement. The QIC-EY will also develop a training/coaching model for the workforce that focuses on learning skills necessary for authentic youth engagement. This training/coaching model will be piloted in the sites and then disseminated nationally. The training/coaching model will include capacity building training, tools, and strategies that will serve as a change agent for the child welfare workforce and system to embrace the voice of youth in all aspects of the system of care.

The QIC-EY is expected to bring systemic change that will be reflected through intentional policies, practices, and culture shifts – at first, within the selected pilot sites and, later, to the nation at large. The new center is expected to raise awareness, and to change the mindsets of caregivers, social work professionals, families, court personnel and other support

agencies in order for youth to be recognized as competent, knowledgeable parties who deserve to have input and decision-making power about their lives.

# INTRODUCTION

Despite the child welfare system's focus on legal permanency, many youths exit foster care without permanency. According to AFCARS Report #27, over 20,000 children who exited care during 2019 did so through emancipation. Additionally, almost 25,000 children in care in September 2019 had a case plan goal of emancipation or long-term foster care (Avery, 2010).

Prior research indicates that engaging youth in their own permanency planning improves permanency and transition-related outcomes while enhancing both child and agency wellbeing (Salazar, Spiera, & Pfister, 2020). Engaging youth in permanency planning allows youth to gain a sense of control in their own decision-making process and enhances their decision-making skills (Weisz et al., 2011). Child welfare agencies also benefit from engaging youth in services through the creation of more effective and relevant policies, programs and services, and improved relationships and understanding between staff and youth (Walker, Seibel, & Jackson, 2017). Youth involvement expands permanency options, resulting in fewer children leaving care without a connection to a stable, consistent adult (Salazar et al., 2018; Schwalbe, 2012).

However, despite the research demonstrating the effectiveness of youth engagement in permanency planning and youth interest in having a say in decisions that impact them, child welfare practice has not historically – nor presently – centered on youth voice or engagement (Saunders & Mace, 2006). The culture and mindset among the child welfare workforce need to adapt to see youth as partners This change requires training and ongoing coaching on how to establish relationships with youth on their caseloads, engage them in decision making, and empower them to use their voice

(Havlicek, Curry, & Villalpando, 2018). Creating shared power requires staff to see youth as experts who have important perspectives and innovative ideas to share. Authentic youth engagement (EY) requires staff to dedicate time needed to establish a trusting relationship with youth, by listening to them, respecting their opinions and being consistently present and available.

In early 2022, the QIC-EY team conducted a systematic literature review of available peer reviewed and gray literature regarding the essential competencies and characteristics of youth engagement child welfare professionals. The Workforce Systematic Literature Review revealed nine competencies and three characteristics of youth engagement child welfare professionals, and the QIC Workforce Council identified two additional characteristics which were not coded for in the review. The identified competencies and characteristics support implementation of the three main responsibilities of youth engagement child welfare professionals in a permanency planning context: Inform youth, Elicit information from youth, and Partner with youth. The three competencies that were mentioned with the highest frequency in the present interviews were building trusting relationships, communication and listening skills, and preparing and informing youth.

To understand current efforts to engage youth in child welfare settings, as well as barriers to engagement and recommendations to promote authentic youth engagement, the QIC-EY team conducted a series of 15 interviews with workforce professionals. Interviewees included case workers, supervisors, and members of executive leadership in child welfare agencies. Results revealed that youth are being engaged primarily through family team meetings, family search efforts, and conversations with their case worker. Child welfare professionals felt most comfortable beginning to engage youth at age 12 or 14, when they felt it was developmentally appropriate to do so. The top recommendations to promote youth engagement were targeted worker training, coaching, and supervision, and reducing caseloads to allow time for relationship building.

# METHODOLOGY

## PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

Participants were identified through the Workforce Advisory Council as well as partner organizations that QIC-EY partners were familiar with through other grants. A list was compiled of administrators, supervisors, and case managers from several states and they were contacted to determine eligibility and interest in participating in individual interviews with a facilitator from one of the partner agencies. Once confirmed, an individual interview was scheduled. A confidentiality agreement was sent to each participant in advance of the interviews and was reviewed at the start of the call. Each interview took approximately 60 minutes to complete. All interviews were completed remotely over Zoom. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the interviewers took detailed field notes. Participants were compensated with a $75 Amazon gift card for their participation.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The QIC-EY team designed the interview guide with the intent to answer the following research questions:

1. How are youth engaged in key activities while they are involved with the child welfare system?

2. Do engagement approaches vary based on the child's age, race, cultural background, and/or LGBTQ identity?

3. What are the main barriers to engaging youth in permanency planning?

4. What are the perceived benefits of engaging youth in permanency planning?

5. What recommended changes in policy and practice could enhance youth engagement?

6. What would workforce professionals like to see included in a youth engagement training?

The present report is organized around these six research questions. We also review how the themes identified in the Workforce Systematic Literature Review were reflected in participants' responses to these questions.

## THEME AND SUBTHEME CODING

To extract themes from the interviews, the authors used a framework analysis approach (Goldsmith, 2021). A framework analysis includes a mix of inductive (derived from the transcripts) and deductive (pre-defined) coding. First, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data. Members of the research team recommended preliminary themes based on the interview guide and a previous systematic literature review regarding the essential competencies and characteristics of youth engagement child welfare professionals. The preliminary themes and their definitions created the initial framework for review.

Second, upon reviewing the transcripts, the reviewers had the freedom to add new thematic codes that were distinctly different from the preliminary themes. The coding framework was adjusted in an iterative process as the reviewers scanned the interviews.

Third, researchers coded the interviews in accordance with the pre-determined themes. The researchers continued to expand or modify theme definitions when the existing categories did not sufficiently represent the material. After the initial review and framework adjustment, the authors reviewed the full set of transcripts again to ensure each interview was reviewed using the final framework of themes. Upon two full reviews of each interview, the researchers then summarized the themes and frameworks

provided in the data and interpreted the results through the lens of the previous systematic literature review.

The results were organized based on the research questions, as well as the youth engagement child welfare professionals characteristics and competencies identified in the literature review.

## SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

Fifteen workforce professionals participated in interviews between February 2nd-February 22nd, 2022. Participants worked in a total of nine states: Indiana (n=3), Michigan (n=2), Alabama (n=2), Nebraska (n=2), Pennsylvania (n=2), California (n=1), Colorado (n=1), Massachusetts (n=1), and Kansas (n=1). Participants were evenly split across public (n=8) and private (n=7) child welfare agencies.

Figure 1. Agency type

Agency Type

Private
47%

Public
53%
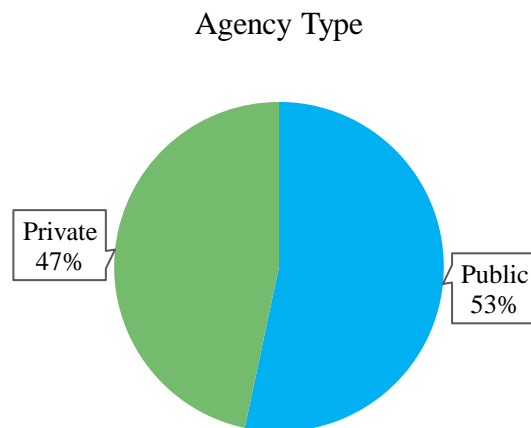
Most participants were child welfare supervisors (n=5), followed by case managers or child and family specialists (n=4), members of executive leadership (n=4), and child welfare administrators/support staff (n=2).

Figure 2. Job type



**Job Type**

Administrator 13%
Supervisor 33%
Leadership 27%
Case Manager 27%
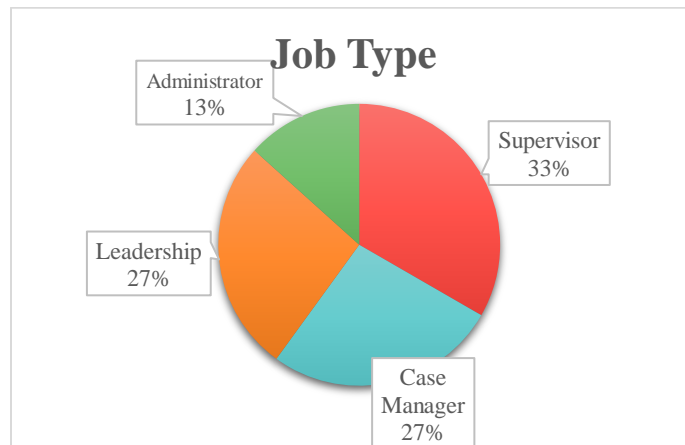
Nearly half of participants (47%) had been in their role for five or more years. One-fifth of participants (20%) had been in their role for 3-4 years, and one-third (33%) had been in their role for 1-2 years.

Figure 3. Years in position



Years in position

Number of participants

1-2 years
3-4 years
5+ years
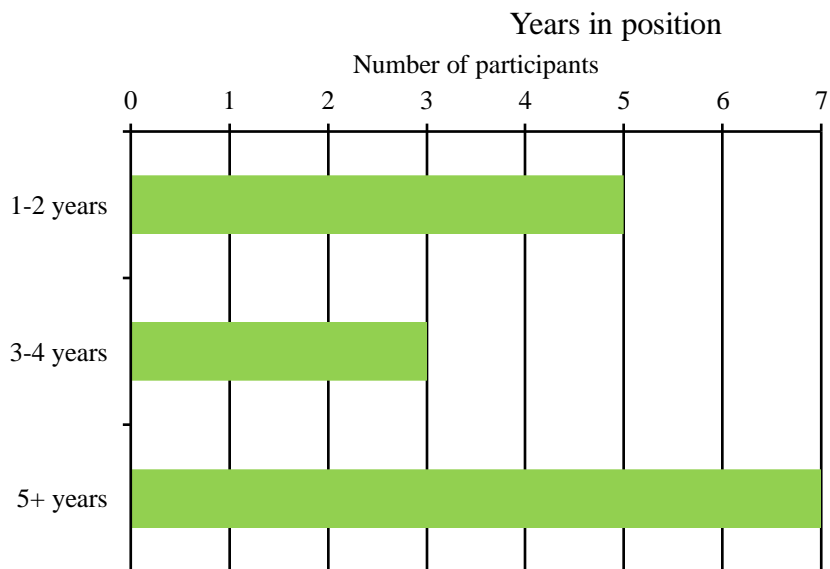
# RESULTS

The most common form of youth engagement in case planning was teaming or conferencing with the youth and their permanency team, which could consist of parents/caregivers, family member(s), guardian ad litem, and other service providers. In general, youth were invited to attend these meetings, though the youth's level of engagement during the meeting was not always specified. Child welfare professionals supported youth engagement in court by encouraging them to attend and accommodating their attendance, eliciting information from youth about what they would like to tell the court, providing opportunities for alternative forms of engagement if youth could not be present at court, and preparing youth for court hearings.

The most common engagement approach to support relational permanency was consulting with youth to search for family or family-like connections that may be supportive for youth. Child welfare professionals struggled to engage youth in efforts to promote cultural permanency, as there appeared to be no guidance regarding how to gather information about the aspects of their culture a youth finds most important and meaningful.

Youths' level of engagement varied by age. Ages 12, 14, and 16 seemed to be points at which youth were often granted more rights to engage in decisions about their life. Depending on the state and agency, youth's rights to engage in decisions about their future were granted by some combination of state laws, court orders, agency policies, or simply the child welfare professional's belief that the youth was ready to engage in conversations. Of the 15 interviews, five indicated there were state laws or agency policies

that gave youth the right to make some decisions related to legal permanency at age 12 (n=1) or 14 (n=4).

Child welfare professionals felt that engaging youth was important because it promotes a sense of personal empowerment in youth that often feel they have little or no autonomy. This helps youth cope emotionally while motivating them to effectively partner with their case worker to create a long-term permanency plan. Recommendations to promote youth engagement included worker training and coaching; allowing more time for workers to build relationships by reducing caseloads; providing supervision that reinforces the training model; institutionalizing the agency's commitment to youth voice and partnership; creating policies that require youth engagement; providing youth with options and scaffolding; improving worker pay and working conditions; and increasing the number of resources available in the community. The most frequently cited worker skills to support youth engagement were building trusting relationships, communication and listening skills, and preparing and informing youth.

To further describe the workforce experience with the engagement of children and youth, the results from the following main themes are presented: youth engagement in practice, benefits of youth engagement, barriers to youth engagement, recommendations to promote engagement, suggestions for staff training, and supervision and coaching. All 15 participants provided information in each of these main themes. See table 1 for a description of each main theme.

Table 1. Main theme description

| Theme | Description |
| --- | --- |
| Youth engagement in practice | How youth are engaged in case planning, placement and visitation decisions, permanency planning, in court, and youth agency in decision making |
| Benefits of engagement | The benefits of youth engagement such as improved wellbeing, increased participation in planning, benefits for the staff/organization, placement stability/permanency, reduction of trauma, improved regulation of behavior, and youth compliance |
| Barriers to youth engagement | The barriers to youth engagement such as agency policy and norms (caseloads/turnover), mindset of the child welfare workforce, lace of resources and training, and youth is not able or does not desire to be engaged. |
| Recommendations to promote engagement | Recommendations to promote youth engagement included worker training/hiring, reduced caseloads, more time to build relationships, supervision, institutionalized opportunities for youth voice, policy change, inform youth, worker pay/conditions, and increase funding for services. |
| Suggestions for staff training | Suggestions included staff training topics, training modality, and delivery method. |
| Supervision and coaching | Supervision and coaching included case consultations, reinforcing of training model, supervisor and worker alliance, and asking strategic questions. |

# YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN PRACTICE

## Youth engagement in case planning

13 of the 15 interviews indicated that youth were involved in the case planning process. However, the level of youth involvement varied depending on the agency's policies and the age of the child. Older youth over the age of 12, and especially transition aged youth, were much more likely to be directly involved in the case planning process than youth under the age of 12. Seven participants indicated there were formal policies at the agency or state level that required including youth in case planning at certain ages.

- "Quarterly, per Michigan's policy, we are required to have what's called family team meetings. And at a certain age, I believe 12 or 13, we are required to invite children to these family team meetings...involving the child in this, at 12 or 13, gives them the chance to be directly involved in case planning with all of those professionals who maybe they don't get to interact with often."

- "Case planning, 14 and up, they participate in the meeting, and it's a specific special meeting for 14 and up, where the child talks about what they want to work on or contributes to that conversation with the other CFT members. Younger than that, they can participate if it's deemed appropriate or in the child's best interest, but 14 and up is where it's basically the child has to participate in the meeting."

- "Young people that are 17 and older have to have a written transition plan from the time they're 17"

Even in situations where there was no formal policy requiring engagement at certain ages, participants generally indicated that they began engaging youth in the case planning process when they entered adolescence, so long as doing so was developmentally appropriate. For example, one participant explained,

- "I have seen younger kids that have been developmentally appropriate, but usually not before 12 or 13, I think is the youngest I've seen kiddos

involve and have a say...14, 15, 16, right around there, then we start to let them come to the team meetings and actually have a say, but with their age prior to that, we don't give them a ton of say."

Agencies generally allowed for more discretion regarding whether and how to engage children under the age of 12 in case planning. However, one participant explained their agency did require engagement of younger children:

- "Our standard work instruction says that children aged five and older should be actively involved in any case planning to the extent of their development. And so the five and up are the ones that we want to include in our monthly family team meetings to the extent that it's appropriate for them and having those conversations about what they want to do, what they would like to see for their future."

Other participants explained that they consulted with children under the age of 12 on what they would like included in their case plan in a developmentally appropriate way or did not include them at all: "Younger kids...talk about it, but I don't see them as being actively engaged in that process." For younger children especially, child welfare professionals often designed case plans on behalf of the child without consulting with them.

One participant stated that "case planning for younger children under school age would be less engagement with the child themselves, more observation of the child and kind of identifying their needs and any barriers towards case planning." - transcript 6. Another participant indicated that they consult with other service providers to develop a child's case plan, but not the child themselves: "With the younger kids…I don't know that we do a really great job. We look to the educators and to any therapists involved for input. But we perhaps don't do as good a job involving the kids directly." - transcript 12. Some participants expressed desire for younger youth to be engaged in the case planning process to a greater degree. For example:

- "I don't think there's anything magical about the age of 14, as long as it's developmentally appropriate, and kids can understand some of the

decisions they're making, I really feel like we should start that a lot younger, like, "If you could do any sport, what would you do? Do you want to do girl Scouts?..." And start to give them a little more control over their environment, because right now with my younger kiddos, when I'm writing treatment plans, I'm just putting goals in there of things that we feel they should be doing or need to do. There's not a lot of collaboration."

### *Engagement strategies*

Overwhelmingly, the most common form of youth engagement in case planning was teaming or conferencing. Twelve interviews discussed including youth in some form of team meeting, most commonly referred to as Child and Family Team Meetings (CFTM). These meetings often include multiple stakeholders in the youth's life, including family members and other service providers such as guardian ad litem. Participants indicated that older youth actively participated in these meetings, sharing their "needs and desires" and providing input on what goals they would like to work towards. Participants stated that caseworkers "take [the youth's] opinion seriously."

- "Children and youth are involved often in being aware of the case plan goals. They meet monthly to discuss what those are, and then they are typically engaged quarterly through their Child and Family Team meetings by bringing in their entire team to inform everyone so that everyone has that shared… discussion and hopefully that shared vision of what the plan is. They also, if there are not parents or identified caregivers that are engaged, will have child-focused Child and Family Team meetings that will wrap around the plans of the child."

- "We have quarterly family team meetings and children that are age appropriate do attend those meetings. We discuss the goal, we discuss services, we discuss the plan for the child moving forward and they definitely participate. They're invited, they participate, they're able to speak up and say what they feel that they want, what they feel is best, if

they want to go home, if they don't want to go home and we kind of move forward from there."

Six interviews discussed how youth over the age of 15 or 16 were involved in transition planning. Generally, this planning was done proactively through ongoing conversations with youth about what they want for their future.

- "At 16, we have to start providing independent living services for them. So my kiddos that are 16, I personally have to ensure that they have met three hours of independent living skills of some sort every single week. And so at 16, we bump them up to say, 'You know what? This is your plan. This is your case, your goals, your life, what are we going to do with it?'"

- "If we have a teenager, who's moving into our group home, we start discharge planning, the moment a youth comes in and because the youth is involved in developing their own treatment plan, we're talking to them right away about what would be next steps after living here."

Five interviews referenced youth engagement in developing their treatment plan, also referred to as an Individual Service Plan (ISP). Participants indicated that youth were, at minimum, in the room when their treatment plan was created and any time it was updated. Youth were often allowed to provide input about what kinds of goals they wanted to work towards and what activities they wanted to be engaged in. One participant explained, "The young people here are involved in drafting their own treatment plans and setting the goals in those treatment plans. They see all of it, they sign off on it. They participate in it."

### *Barriers to engagement in case planning*

Four interviews indicated that youth are not engaged in case planning. One participant discussed how there was more of a focus on "checking the box" of developing a case plan versus meaningfully engaging youth in the process:

- "[We have] a compliance view of treatment planning as opposed to a relationship building lens. Sometimes it really becomes check the box as opposed to sort of looking at more qualitative things that are happening." Another participant discussed youths' lack of engagement in the team meeting, indicating their staff struggles "with knowing how to engage [youth]. I've been in a lot of case planning meetings where the kid never said a thing."

Other participants discussed the age of the child as the main reason children were not engaged in case planning.

## Youth engagement in placement & visitation decisions

### *Placement decisions*

Nine interviews indicated that youth are consulted in some way regarding where and with whom they would like to live. As with case planning, the degree of engagement depended on the child's age and development, as well as policies requiring that youth are invited to engage in their case once they reach a certain age. One participant explained that they assessed children's developmental capability to have conversations, stating, *"for placement decisions, if a child is able to discuss or have a thoughtful conversation with a case worker, as young as they may be, we automatically have that conversation."* – transcript 6. Another participant indicated that teenagers are allowed to assert preferences over what type of family they would like to be placed with:

- "14 and older [they] are pretty much very active in their placement decisions. Of course overall, it is the agency's decision what's in their best interest. But there are teens that are okay with same sex couples. Some are not okay with that. As far as foster parents and whatnot or even another race for that matter."

One participant elaborated on the tension between consulting with youth about where they would like to live while acknowledging that foster placements can be scarce. In practice, this may result in child welfare

professionals giving youth an opportunity to learn about their placement option and consent in advance rather than providing youth with multiple placement options:

- "Depending on the age, primarily for teenagers, they're presented with a placement. And that is, I don't know if they have the option to just keep denying placements, but they're presented with a placement and it's discussed if this is going to be a good option, or is this somewhere they want to go? A lot of times it's limited by what's available, but they try to engage youth in conversations about where they're going to be placed."

Other participants explained how they incorporated both the youth's placement preferences as well as the recommendations of their larger permanency team:

- "Children are given the opportunity to discuss… through various means, such as Child and Family Team meetings, interviews with or questions by both their case manager, court appointed special advocates, to a lesser degree guardian ad litem. But in those interactions that they… the opportunity to discuss what they would like to see in a placement and with whom they would like to be placed. And when at all possible… that is taken into consideration, along with the recommendations of the rest of that child's team, when seeking an appropriate placement."

Participants also described the importance of exploring whether youth have any existing kin connections that they may like to live with, even if they are already in a foster home:

- "For example, say a child is placed in a foster home with a non-relative. At visits, I would ask the child if they like where they're living. If they feel a bond to their foster parents. If there, for example, is a child who's in a non-related home and they have expressed to me, they want to be with, for example, Aunt Cindy…I would take that into strong consideration and reach out to that individual, if they haven't already been assessed, to see if placement is an option. Because what the child wants is very, very

important. And if that person is appropriate, doing what I can to place the child in that home."

### *Barriers to engagement in placement decisions*

Six participants indicated that youth were not consulted on where they would like to be placed, or that foster parents were engaged on behalf of youth. For children who were too young to be engaged, one participant explained that *"in a way we are engaging the children, even though they can't speak for themselves, by honoring what we know is true... children should stay with their family."* -transcript 14. Other participants explained that children were not engaged in placement decisions due to a lack of available foster homes or challenges placing children out of state:

- "We're going to shoot for the first home that tells us they can take placement for a kiddo. So we don't give kids, really, of any age, any say about where they're going to be placed. And truth be told, the referral just comes to us. And we just tell DCS whether we have a home or not. So we don't have any necessarily directly contact the kids to say, 'Hey, we've got a home. Do you want to talk to them and see if that placement will work?' We don't give them a lot of say."

- "The Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children. And so there are some regulations that would require processes before placing a child in another state and ensuring that those are met. And so there are some statutory regulations regarding a child that may be involved with the child welfare system with being able to place. And so for me, as an administrator, I'm in a region that neighbors another state, and so... to the point where if you... in a certain city within my jurisdiction, if you walk across the street, you're right in another state. And so there are a lot of families that are very much living between two states, and so there are a lot of children who have family."

### Visitation decisions

Eleven interviews indicated that youth are engaged in decisions related to visitation with parents, siblings, and other relatives. In some cases, older youth were more likely to have a say in visitation, but in general there was less of a difference in how younger and older youth were engaged in decisions related to visitation when compared to placement decisions.

- "I would say it's probably more around the age 10 before all of our kids are actively engaged. But even the little ones that can tell you, yes, they want to see mommy, yes, they want more visits, no, they don't want to go home. Whatever the case may be, even though they're little and they might not understand the whole big picture and everything else that's going on, at least getting what they want and what they need to have that information."

In general, child welfare professionals checked in with older and younger youth alike about how visits were going and how they'd like them to go moving forward:

- "We ask them about visits. We assess how visits are going, if there're supervised visits to determine… do we need to increase visits? Do we need to ask for unsupervised overnights? And then from there we will transition to return home. So we do speak with the children about how visits are going with their parents. What are their feelings about it? And take into their consideration on what they're reporting to us to determine what direction we should be moving with visits."

- "The child is able to express, hey, these visits are going well, I want more time. Or hey, this is not going well. I don't feel comfortable. And then we, as a team decide, hey, we need to change the visits."

### Visitation with siblings

Most participants stated there were laws or policies requiring siblings to be placed together. If siblings were unable to be placed in a foster home together, visitations were required at specific time intervals. Given how

specific the requirements were, youth were not generally consulted about sibling visitation, as the law mandated those visitations:

- "In Michigan, per policy, when siblings are in separate homes, they're required to have at least monthly sibling visit. And unfortunately, that can be difficult sometimes. And so, it's important for not just the worker to be engaged in this, but also the different homes that the children are placed in. Having that whole system of people who are working towards the same goal for the child."

- "Siblings, if they're not placed together, they do have sibling visits at least once a month. So they are able to still see their sibling, it's not like, although they're not placed together, they'll never see their sibling again. They do see them at least once a month, depending on the foster parent and the foster parents, their schedules and things they possibly can see the child more than once, or even have phone calls with their sibling."

### *Barriers to engagement in visitation decisions*

Four participants stated that youth are not engaged in visitation decisions due to court orders requiring visitation to take place in a particular way.

- "The law pretty much says, "Yeah, that sucks. But you have to go do this supervised visit with Mom, or Dad, or whoever it is." And we're talking within days of being removed. And so there hasn't been any, "Let's get them into therapy and process the trauma." And we just immediately throw them right back into it. And that's just law, where we're at, they have to. So they are not getting really any say on visitation."

- "Visitation, it's a difficult topic, I think there's just so many variables to consider, including the child or youth schedule. Often they have many providers and services in place, and it's not really ever seen as something that's an option, it's something that's ordered for them to do. Of course, we work alongside our youth if they do not want to participate in visitations and we do try to put services in place such as therapy,

individually and/or with family to try and help work through whatever it is to allow them to engage but I think it's a complex thing."

However, other participants explained that it is often possible to push back against court orders and advocate for the youth's desires related to visitation:

- "Especially of some of the older kids, if there's a reason why they don't want to have visitation, or they're concerned about visitation... We try to definitely keep them safe in their visitation and hear what they want. Some of them are court-mandated, so they might not have as much say. But when they're able to have a say, I think they really do try to talk to them about it. If the child's struggling with that, and they are at a point where they're allowed to say they don't want to have visits, they honor that."

- "Children do have the right to voice their concerns with visits. These are typically followed up by Child and Family Team meetings where the team will discuss the concerns that are held from the child. And then these are then processed with the child's therapist if there is one…It's likely to be a clinician that is working with the child if there are concerns about a child and parent or caregiver's visitation, and then those [notes] from that therapist are conveyed along with the child's views in court. If a child has expressed adamant feelings about not attending a visitation, the courts have not ordered that those visitations be held regardless."

In most cases, youth were not forced to attend visitations if they did not want to, even if the court mandated the visits:

- "There's not a lot of engagement with that and I say that because the visitation is set up based on court, usually in initial court order judge sets a standard visitation and then over time the ISP team can recommend a change of visitation far as the progress of the case, maybe more interaction with the parents or less, or it depends on which direction the case is going in. Now we do have it set up where if a child does not want to go to their visitation, they can express that. And we don't force them to go."

## Youth engagement in permanency planning

### *Legal permanency*

Eleven interviews discussed ways in which youth are engaged in decisions related to legal permanency through adoption, guardianship, reunification, or aging out. Five participants indicated there were state laws or agency policies that gave youth the right to make some decisions related to legal permanency at age 12 (n=1) or 14 (n=4). Two participants described youths' right to consent to permanency options:

- "However, children 14 and over have to consent to an adoption. So if they don't consent to the adoption, then they're not able to be adopted. So if they don't want their goal to be adoption, then we will either look at guardianship of if the foster parent or if there's a relative that's interested in planning for the child, or it will be APPLA. Which is Another Planned Placement Living Arrangement. And your goal cannot be changed to APPLA unless you're 16 or older."

- "Once a child reaches 12 years old in our jurisdiction, we are required to actually have their consent regarding permanency, whether that be adoption or a relative guardianship, or a custody order. So at 12 is when they actually have to consent to those permanency options."

Other participants described how their agencies expected them to collaborate more with youth who are 14 and older about which permanency goal(s) they would like to work towards:

- "Youth that are approximately 14 and older have more of a voice and more of an input into who they are with and how things are going. And if that should continue with the placement developing into a permanent placement, whether through adoption or guardianship."

- "And we start to give them a little more say in, "Do you want to be adopted? Do you want to just hang it out in the foster care system and age out of the system, APPLA?" Those types of things. So right about 14,

I feel like we start to give kids a little more say in what they want with their lives."

Participants explained that they collaborate with other service providers, such as the courts, to elicit and assess what youth would like in regard to legal permanency. For example, one participant stated:

- "We are not the only entities that have the discussion with the youth. Generally we engage in discussion in the home they're placed in, whether that be an identified potential permanent placement. We also have discussions with them outside of the home, either at the therapy office, during transportation, at hearings or family team meetings. And on some of those occasions, other entities like the Guardian ad Litem also is included in those discussions or they have separate discussions to also vet out some of the thoughts of the youth on a permanent placement. So we work often in concert with the Guardian ad Litem and the therapist if there is a therapist involved, in determining what is in their best interest, the children's best interest, and what their input is on that and the rational surrounding that?"

Several participants explained the importance of informing youth about all of their permanency options, and preparing them for the implications of different decisions:

- "[With] the different ways in which a child can gain permanency, there are different topics to discuss with them. So…we try to do a lot of prep work with the kids, if it's adoption or reunification or guardianship, just to help them understand what that means and what that means for their lives and just engage them as much as possible in getting them ready for that transition."

Often, engagement around legal permanency happened in the context of a family team meeting. However, simply inviting youth to family team meetings without adequate preparation did not set them up for true engagement in the permanency planning process. In order for youth to meaningfully engage in the meeting, one participant explained:

- "We typically get with the kids prior to the meeting. Of course we don't put them just on the spot at the meeting. But when we're going to do our month contacts with them, we're discussing permanency at these monthly in-home visits with them. What does permanency look like for them? Where do they want to be outside of foster care?"

Another participant explained a creative and developmentally appropriate way to engage youth in permanency team meetings even when the youth is not able to be physically present at the meeting:

- "About four or five years ago, there was a component added to [our permanency round tables to] give children a voice, where children actually have a video where they discuss what they want to see for themselves as it relates to permanency. And that video is played statewide when stakeholders are looking to obtain permanency for children so that that child's role and voice can be heard as that team tries to take the more challenging or difficult cases that have been sought to achieve permanency. That child's voice, who they are, can be given weight when engaging in that process before going forward."

### *Barriers to youth engagement in legal permanency*

Six participants described permanency planning processes which did not include engagement with youth. Three participants discussed how laws mandating a one-size-fits-all approach were a barrier to engaging youth in planning for legal permanency. Often, it seemed that the child welfare professionals followed the policies to the best of their ability without consulting with youth about what they wanted:

- "[The] majority of the time when children come into care, when they're initially removed from their parents, the goal is reunification unless they come in on a permanent custody petition, then if they come in on a permanent custody petition, the goal is to terminate parental rights."

- "With our permanency plans or our case plans that come to us, first of and foremost, the goal that will most likely always be on there is that

their permanency plan is going to be reunification to start. Legally, they have to do that. And so after time has progressed, then those things with termination, and adoption, guardianship, some of our older kids will do an APPLA, which is Another Permanency Plan and Living Arrangement, I think is what it stands for. Basically the kids are old enough to say, "I don't want to be adopted. I want to age out of the system. Just let me be where I'm at." And we do that for them."

Another participant described agency policies that prevented the child welfare professional from proceeding with permanency options in a timely manner:

- "You're not readily able to have that child achieve that permanency with an uncle or an aunt because of making sure that... the regulatory processes are met, despite the fact that there may already be a mutually agreed upon goal between that child and that family and a relationship already established. So just speaking to some of those systemic issues that can impede upon the progress towards the permanency."

### *Relational permanency*

Thirteen of the fifteen participants indicated that youth were engaged in efforts to build relational permanency. The most common engagement approach was consulting with youth to search for family or family-like connections that may be supportive for youth. Nine participants discussed utilizing family search tactics with youth to support relational permanency. In some cases, this search was done primarily to find a placement for the child. For example:

- "If a child's removed, we always ask them who the important people in their lives are so that we can hopefully find a relative or kin-like placement as they age." In other cases, the intent was to find people who could be supportive to youth in whatever way they were able: "Our agency tries to really look at that and values that even if you, maybe as a family member, can't take the child in, that doesn't mean that you can't still be a permanent connection for them."

Generally, conversations about relationships happened informally, with one participant explaining that "it's really through conversations and talking about important people." -transcript 6. A staff member in a residential home for older youth described the importance of having organic conversations in a way that is natural for youth:

- "We think about family search and engagement and part of that involves trying to identify people who maybe were in a young person's life in the past and aren't anymore and sort of wondering, could they be in the future, that sort of thing. So maybe direct care staff is sitting on the living room couch with a teenager and they're watching the basketball game and the... They could be having a conversation about, the stats of the different basketball players and who's your favorite team and who's going to be in the playoffs, and that sort of thing. And all of that's good and it's kind of just basic relationship building, but that staff person can then also say things like, where did you learn to love basketball? Who taught you how to play? Did you ever play with neighborhood kids? What did you know, who were they? Were there parents around?"

On the other end of the spectrum, some participants had formal agency policies they followed regarding relational permanency. One participant described how their agency had institutionalized the family search process, convening a kinship committee meeting that includes the youth and the caregiver that the youth was removed from within a week of being placed in a non-relative home:

- "We often try to identify supports from the very beginning. We've just implemented a process in which any child that is not placed with any identified kinship or relative supports, immediately within the first [week] of being placed…is brought before…a kinship committee to try to explore for those essential connections. So once that child has been placed in a foster care, that very next week, there's a meeting to try to explore… where are [the child's] relatives?"

### *Cultural permanency*

Participants across the board struggled to gather information about youths' culture in a consistent way. Strategies to support cultural permanency were in many cases linked with relational permanency and placement efforts but lacked structure regarding how information was gathered and used to support cultural permanency.

- "When we're talking about trying to find relatives, making sure that culture's part of that conversation. So making sure that family, if we can't find family, if can like placement is available, that they can still engage with some of those cultural expectations and making sure that children are part of those conversations with placement providers."

- "I believe that this is an area of opportunity. I think that a lot of emphasis is placed on finding appropriate placements or just finding placements at all, that a lot of a cultural identity is typically placed on when a family initiates that conversation or a child initiate that, rather than the agency initiating those questions to try to identify that, at least at the onset. As the case progresses, I think that those questions may come out later, but I do see this as not as much being an area that is a focus."

Many participants struggled to gather information about youths' cultural context, especially if the youth was unable to articulate what they needed themselves. To work past this, one participant described how they engage family to try to get more information about the youth's culture, with limited success:

- "We try to look to other family members or other people that are associated with the family of origin. And often with just how those relationships within those families work and their support systems, often they're not healthy supports or appropriate support. And often they're not knowledgeable about that cultural piece either. So in some of those arenas, particularly with the native children, we really struggle."

Placement with family members who share the youth's cultural context was a goal for many participants, but not often achieved due to a lack of placement options:

- "If a kid has needs that are connected to a specific culture, trying to facilitate it so that the foster family would hopefully, again, number one, respect those cultural aspects; but number two, maybe even be able to engage with the child on that end. Hopefully, it doesn't always work this way, it would be good to have the kid in a home that share those cultural values. But that's always a tough thing especially with the older youths trying to find that."

Some participants described proactive conversations professionals could have with youth to support cultural continuity, but it was not clear whether the participants were using these conversational approaches in practice:

- "Asking them about their culture, making sure they can get to their mosque or their synagogue or their church, if they want to. Making sure that the food that you're offering, asking them about what their favorite foods are, and making sure that you can get foods that are connected to their culture, if that's important to them. Making sure that you can get them to a hair salon that actually can work with their type of hair. The only way to engage a youth in that is through a conversation."

Five participants described how they engaged foster parents on the youth's behalf to support cultural permanency. It was unclear whether the information provided to the foster parents about the youth's cultural needs was elicited from the youth or based on assumptions about the youth's race and ethnicity. Strategies to engage foster parents included cultural competency training as well as resources to support the youth's traditions, religion, and hair care. One participant explained that foster parents at their agency *"have got a pretty good foundation of training with cultural competence prior to being licensed but have sought out hair stylists in town that can teach them how to do hair for a biracial child."*

### *Race*

When participants were asked about race and how their approach to engagement may vary depending on what race a youth identifies with, most child welfare professionals gave short responses that reflected a cursory understanding of race and youth engagement. Some workers reflected an understanding of the significance of placing a child of color in a White foster home:

- "A child who is African-American could go into a foster home with white parents, and they could feel misunderstood, like they're just trying to swoop in and save them, and that they don't have a true understanding of what they have been through."

- "Obviously, if the kid's going to feel more comfortable with a foster family, who is black versus white, you want to try and see if you could facilitate that."

Other child welfare professionals discussed ways that race considerations came up in treatment planning with youth:

- "With our African American females and males, the culture surrounding their hair and those types of things are very important. And sometimes we may need to go as far as putting things in their treatment plan as goals to make sure that it is happening for them and again, giving them a say in where they've come from, what things are important, what they want to do to foster them, still remaining connected to their culture and backgrounds."

- "I have a girl that we wanted to get her counseling, but she said she would be only comfortable if we were able to find a black female counselor. We went through and called multiple service providers in the area until we found one that had an opening that could work with her. Because that was really important for her to have that kind of a connection."

### *LGBTQ*

Participants indicated that they had received some training on how to engage LGBTQ youth, but child welfare professionals desired more resources and information about how to work with and engage LGBTQ youth.

- "We've added, as a part of our mission, about cultural and culture and diversity. I think that for a long time we saw culture as just race. We have now been just discussing LGBTQIA+, but we have not also been discussing culture in all aspects of values and norms and belief systems. And even when discussions are held, there is no follow through, so... or very little follow through, shall I say."

- "So we've done lots of different trainings and have just continued to be more intentional in having training specific to serving children of color and then I would say the same thing for our children who identify in the LGBTQ community, because we also have foster parents who identify in that community as well. So we are just always looking for different trainings and we have, I know we have one required training a year, it's mandated that our staff takes, but we also offer various other ones throughout the year."

## Youth engagement in court

There were four major court engagement themes identified in the interviews: encourage youth attendance, listen to youth, alternative participation, and prepare youth for court.

### *Encourage youth attendance*

Eleven participants indicated that youth are invited to court in some cases and/or described efforts to accommodate youth attendance at court. Strategies to promote youth attendance included asking the youth if they would like to attend, providing transportation to court, and asking the judge whether the child can attend a hearing. As with other areas of child welfare involvement, older youth were more likely to be invited to court, and in

some cases were required to attend. One participant explained, *"I ask if they would like to be involved and if they would like to attend. More so 12 and up… I seek out some additional information from their present caretakers…to see if that would be appropriate."*

### Listen to youth

Nine participants discussed ways in which child welfare professionals and/or court staff elicited youth voice prior to or during the court hearing. This theme also included the importance of staff giving weight to youth's wishes when making decisions about their case. One participant stated they *"will typically ask the child if there's anything important, they would like me to know. If there's anything I important I would like the courts to know."*

### Alternative participation

Five participants offered alternative ways for youth to participate in court hearings and have their voice heard when they were unable to be physically present at the hearing. Strategies included writing letters to the judge, recording videos about what the youth would like their future to look like, and having youth fill out information forms about how they feel about their current situation. These strategies allowed child welfare professionals to engage youth in a developmentally appropriate way, when speaking directly to the judge in the hearing may not be advisable. One participant explained how their agency implemented a court information form for youth:

- "We have youth feedback or information form that they can complete and submit to the judge. They are age appropriate. We have one where someone can read the questions to younger kids, and they can circle answers or draw. We have others for the older kids where they can do more of a combination of short essay and yes or no questions so that the judge can get a sense of whether or not they feel good with where they're at."

***Prepare youth for court***

Four participants discussed ways that they set the stage for what youth should expect in regard to their court hearing. Preparation generally included providing an overview of what would be talked about in the hearing and helping youth decide what they would like to advocate for. A participant explained how they explored permanency options with youth in advance of their court date:

- "That's when I have to have those tough conversations with them about what's next in the case plan, as far as them staying in the system until they age out, them participating in termination trial to be adopted. Pretty much exploring all those options and just the reality of it."

Table 2. Youth engagement in court

| Theme | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative Quotes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Encourage youth attendance in court | Workers indicated that youth are invited to court. Workers often accommodated youth attendance at court by advocating for them to attend and providing transportation. | 11 | 73% | *"When we have children 12 and up, we are trying to engage them, trying to ensure that they can maybe call into court. In the past, we've transported them to court, making sure that they have a voice in front of our magistrate."*<br><br>*"If kids tell us that they want to come, we will make arrangements for them to go, whether the judge has specifically asked for us to do so or not."* |

| Theme | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative Quotes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Listen to youth | Youth voice is valued and elicited in court hearings | 9 | 60% | *"The judge really does like to have them at the hearing, he likes to hear from them…I've seen the judge specifically address the youth and say, let them say their piece. So I definitely think that they are heard pretty well in the court hearings."* *"But every single one of those judges that I've ever worked with has stopped. They've had a conversation with that kid. And that's it, their sole focus was talking to them about school and how they're doing in the foster home, just what they're doing and try to just stay in the know with how these kids are progressing."* |
| Alternative participation | Caseworkers and/or court staff provide youth with alternative means to participate in hearings when not physically present in court | 5 | 33% | *"I think there are different ways bring a young person into those court proceedings, even if they can't be physically present. And that can be through writing letters, through video, through audio reporting. And for younger kids through pictures, or again, they're filling out a certain tool that you can then bring in and say… I did this exercise with a young person to try to assess how safe they feel, for instance, in certain settings. And here are the pictures they drew. And here's what we might infer from that."* |

| Theme | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative Quotes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Prepare youth for court | Workers prepare youth for what will happen in the court hearing | 4 | 33% | *"We, as an agency, try to help prepare them and, get them ready for what's going to happen in the court hearing."* |

## Youth engagement in agency decision-making

Five participants discussed efforts to engage youth in agency and/or legislative decision making. Opportunities for youth advocacy included participation on advisory boards or committees to advocate for changes to agency and/or state practice and policy, having a voice in worker hiring decisions, and participating in the development and delivery of child welfare professional training.

Two participants discussed opportunities for youth to sit on advisory boards to make changes to state and agency policy:

- "In Kansas we have RYAC and KYAC, they're advisory boards for youth that sit in and advocate for legislation change and talk about what improvements need to be in foster care. So I think when we give youth a voice like that, and show them how to do that, it allows them to engage and be a part of the solution, and it allows them to be heard."

- "Right now we're designing a new facility. We have kids on the committee working with the architect. Six years ago, we changed our name. We did focus groups, with the young men living in our residential program, to help understand what they would want in a name."

One participant indicated that youth are expected to provide input on whether a new worker should be hired:

- "In our residential program, in our independent living program, if you're going to be working with kids, you can't be hired until you're also interviewed by kids. So, you get all the way through the interview

process, but at the end of the day, if the kids say no, then we don't hire that person."

Two participants indicated that youth have a role in planning and delivering training for new workers by attending the training and providing their perspective:

- "We actually include youth voice in all of our training that we do across the state. When we do new director training, new supervisor training, our GALs, our judges, our investigative staff, our independent living staff. We always have a youth voice there, either a panel or a young person that will come in and share and give perspective to that."

## Comfort level working with Older Youth

Six participants were asked about their comfort level working with youth 14 and older. Four participants were comfortable working with older youth, and two shared that they were uncomfortable. Participants shared their favorite things about working with older youth:

- "They're very unique. They all have different talents, and they're just overall unique. And they're not afraid or hesitant to tell you what they want and what they need. So they're very vocal about their needs and I love that. And I tell people all the time, I learn something new from each teen I interact with."

- "Teenagers still have that openness that they can try and effectuate that kind of change, and I like that. There's always that possibility. It seems to be like a little bit more hope for the teen versus an adult. Plus their energy. They're just hysterical. Teenagers say and do a lot of stupid stuff, so keeps you on your toes."

- "They can be sarcastic and smart, and I can just volley right back and forth with them."

Participants also shared the things they felt were the hardest about working with older youth:

- "I think the biggest fear or what I view as most challenging is older children have typically experienced a higher degree of trauma, and I'm always afraid of saying the wrong thing or maybe triggering the child or upsetting them."

- "I think my biggest challenge in working with kids in that age group is some of the slang terms vary so much that it's hard to keep up. And I know I struggle with, I would call it a cultural thing, with the obsession of technology."

- "They know better than I do, and they know everything, and you can't tell them nothing. And just the teen drama that comes with it is difficult because in my head, I'm like, "I've been here. I know where this goes. I just want you to listen to me." But I have to remember that I also had to learn from my mistakes. So I find myself just wanting to protect them from bad choices."

One participant explained how important it is for child welfare professionals to enjoy working with teens if they intend to engage them:

- "If the worker does not, does not care for teens, teens are very smart. They pick up on who's genuine, who's not. So they feel like that worker is not genuine. They're not going to communicate with them at all because they do not trust them."

## INTERVENTIONS AND TOOLS USED TO SUPPORT YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Participants mentioned several interventions and tools they used to support their youth engagement efforts, listed below in alphabetical order:

1. Adolescents Achieving Independence

2. Collaborative Care

3. Engaging Youth and Families training (Indiana)

4. Family Finding

5. Family Safety Circles

6. I Want to Say Something

7. Motivational Interviewing

8. My Life, My Choice

9. Permanency Pact

10.    Permanency Round Tables

11.    Sands of Time and Place

12.    Solutions Based Case Management

13.    Strengths-Based Care

14.    Three Houses

15.    Transitional Living Conference

16.    Youth Guided Family Driven Teaming

In some cases, participants described how they used the tools in practice to engage youth in a developmentally appropriate way.

Three Houses:

- "With a younger child, we might use a tool called Three Houses to really help understand some safety issues…That tool would involve the young person drawing pictures of three houses. And in the three houses, then you'd ask, so what are the good things going on in this house? In the second one you'd ask, what are your worries? This is your house of worries. So what are your worries? And then your third house would be your house of wishes. What are your hopes for the future? …The kids draw the house and then like who is in the house and who comes to the house and those things, because sometimes they might not be able to tell you that the neighbor came over all the time, but they can draw it for you. And so using those types of tools to make sure that we are getting as many supportive people in these children's lives as possible, whether they're going to be placement or just supports for the rest of their lives."

Sands of Time and Place:

- "[You have] different color play sand, and, like a glass jar or something. And a young person picks a different color sand for each of, let's say, five people. And then they pour the color of sand related to that person into the jar, and it might be, how close are you to them, or how important are they to you? And... you might get like a really...deep pink sand and maybe that's grandma and maybe there's like a really thin green line for, that particular aunt or something. And that gives you a sense of what that child feels about those different people, the importance of the different people in that child's life."

Family Safety Circles/Bullseye:

- "[It helps] us understand how a young person perceives how close their relationship is with other people. So it's sort of like a young person puts names within concentric circles. And the further you go out in those concentric circles, the more disconnected the young person is feeling. And then you might ask the young person, is there anyone out here on this? This biggest concentric circle that you would really like to be in your smallest concentric circle, that gives you an idea of what a young person might want."

I Want to Say Something:

- "And so for youth, it might be things, trying to get at things they want us to know about themselves and their family. And the things I like about my family are this, the things I wish could be different were this."

## BENEFITS OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

One primary objective of the research was to identify the key benefits of youth engagement for children and youth in the child welfare system. In general, child welfare professionals explained that engagement was important because it promotes a sense of personal empowerment among youth that often feel they have little or no autonomy. This helps youth cope emotionally while motivating them to effectively partner with their case

worker to identify the best placement available and, ultimately, create a long-term permanency plan.

Twelve of the 15 child welfare professionals interviewed (80%) indicated that authentic youth engagement contributed to improved emotional well-being. Participants indicated that youths improved mental state facilitated relationship building between the youth and the worker. Ten of the 15 child welfare professionals (67%) that were interviewed indicated that authentic engagement leads to greater participation in permanency planning. Child welfare professionals (n=6) also noted that engagement has benefits for individual workers as well as their organizations. Six of the 15 participants also stated that youth engagement contributed to placement stability and permanency while another six indicated it promoted behavior regulation and helped to reduce trauma (n=6). Some child welfare professionals (n=4) also indicated that authentic youth engagement leads to greater compliance among youth that feel they were "finally getting some control back."

Table 3. Benefits of youth engagement

| Theme | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative Quote |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Improved emotional wellbeing | Authentic youth engagement leads to a sense of personal empowerment promotes improved emotional wellbeing of youth. | 12 | 80% | *"They have a sense that their voice is heard and that they are important, which helps in so many different ways. It gives them a sense of control over their lives since so often that is completely taken out from underneath their feet."* |

| Theme | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative Quote |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Greater participation in planning | Youth are more likely to contribute to placement and permanency decisions in a productive way when they are authentically engaged. | 10 | 67% | *"And I [the youth] am motivated in this process because I am also a driver of my process and what happens to me, so I will be likely... more likely to want to be involved, knowing that I can also help to have influence over the outcomes."* |
| Benefits for staff/organization | Staff and organizations benefit from youth engagement because it makes it easier to work effectively with youth and build productive partnerships | 6 | 40% | *"It benefits the caseworker because then they're actually completing goals that are relevant for the child."* |
| Placement stability, permanency | Permanency efforts and placement stability are improved because youth have a say in where they are placed. | 6 | 40% | *"When they are involved, you see less disruptions in their placements. You see permanency quicker when they are involved."* |

| Theme | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative Quote |
|-------|-------------|------------------------|------------|----------------------|
| Reduces trauma, regulates behavior | Youth engagement contributes to emotional wellbeing that helps to reduce stress and youth resistance. | 6 | 40% | *"I just also think it makes foster care less traumatizing for kids when they're involved in the process."* |
| Youth compliance | When youth are authentically engaged, they are more likely to comply with plans they have helped formulate. | 4 | 27% | *"There's not a lot of compliance in general with teens, but it's almost like there's a shift of, 'I'm finally getting some control back. And I'm going to be able to say what I do and do not want to do.' Which makes my job easier to some degree, because then I don't have to dictate to them what they're going to do."* |

## Improved wellbeing

The most frequently cited benefit of authentic engagement was improved emotional wellbeing. When youth are engaged, they gain a sense of emotional empowerment derived from the realization that the worker was helping them take greater control over their lives. This facilitated the process of identifying appropriate placement options while helping to ensure the youth will cooperate with the worker and foster parents rather than engaging in negative behavior that may result in placement disruption.

- "I think it increases self-worth, dignity. It increases [the youth's] wellbeing. Yes, of course, I believe that it does expedite permanency, because the more that [youth] can be heard and understood, the better that you can plan for next steps."

- "The benefits truly are having that buy-in from children, and making them part of that authentic engagement, really hopefully would make it more successful. If we have a child that understands what our goals are, then we can make them part of the team and they can help us with many of those next steps along the way."

- "If they are authentically engaged, they feel comfortable enough to express themselves, their wants, their needs; that they are able to at least have some sort of semblance of trust and understanding that their caseworker is trying to help them."

### Increased participation in planning

Participants explained that when child welfare professionals effectively engaged youth, they became more active in their cases, which helped workers partner with youth. Increased participation in planning helped ensure appropriate placements were being identified and that the youth remained committed to plans that they helped create.

- "I think it's to help the child and ultimately help the family as a whole. But when you have those children and those youth that are engaged in their case, engaged in their case plan, engaged in what is going on, it makes things easier."

- "I think the best case is that the child and the family are actively engaged in making decisions and ultimately doing their own case planning of how they're going to address the issues. And the agency is more of a support, and the child and the family are the ones driving the plan."

- "We've made them aware of the transition plans. Again, talking to them about what is the kids plan? What is it that they want? Because again, we

can all make plans for them, but if it's not their plan, they're going to bail on that."

## Benefits for staff/organization

Staff and organizations also benefited from authentic engagement in that they gained knowledge which helped them manage cases effectively while minimizing youth resistance. This led to increased worker satisfaction which resulted in lower turnover and an increase in the proportion of staff that were fully trained and sufficiently experienced to effectively engage youth.

- "I also think that there is an organizational benefit in that staff can enjoy their work more because they see hope sort of being reignited in kids. And they see that there are possibilities, and it leads to less staff turnover. And therefore you end up with more experienced staff who only get better and better at their jobs. So authentic youth engagement is really helpful to individual youth and families, but it's also really helpful to the organization."

- "When you have that engagement with that child, they're able to paint a picture for you to help you better understand the dynamics of their families so that you can better help that family with resources or even services that need to be in place."

## Placement stability/permanency

When youth were effectively engaged, they were more likely to be cooperative with decisions and regulate behavior that could result in placement disruption. Engagement built trust between child welfare professionals and youth, which helped ensure the worker was well-positioned to assist the youth in efforts to adjust to a new placement.

- "Because crisis often comes when a young person feels like they're not being listened to, even if they're allowed to say the words, the words aren't actually heard or taken into account that leads to crisis. But true,

authentic engagement leads to better emotional regulation, leads to more placement stability, leads to more educational stability."

- "If a child is engaged and their voice is being heard, permanency is achieved as quickly as possible so the child can continue on with their childhood."

- "The more open communication they have, the more they can trust the caseworker, the more that caseworker is going to be able to effectively do things for that child that the child wants to have happen. Whether that's a placement decision or visits."

### Reduces trauma, regulates behavior

When youth are given control over their own lives, they gain a sense of emotional wellbeing that helps them overcome trauma and regulate their behavior. Effective engagement can have both short-term and long-term benefits for youth that may be struggling with trauma-related mental health conditions.

- "I do find, when we do engage them, the process of being in foster care is less traumatic, and the transparency is there, and it allows them to know what's going on. I think sometimes we think we're protecting child when we don't share or engage them in things, when really it does more harm to them."

- "Emotional regulation is more likely to be successful if there's authentic engagement."

### Youth Compliance

Youth are also more likely to comply with various requirements and requests when they understand child welfare professionals are listening to them and putting their interests before other considerations when possible.

- "I think we get better compliance from them, especially with the older ones, to get them involved in their care and actually have some

ownership. They seem to, I feel like they do better in school, in therapies, just in life in general, because they have a sense of ownership and control in that conversation, then."

- "But when you have those children and those youth that are engaged in their case, engaged in their case plan, engaged in what is going on, it makes things easier."

## BARRIERS TO YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Participants identified several barriers to youth engagement under four major categories: agency policies and norms, mindset of child welfare and workforce, lack of resources, and youth resistance to engagement. Agency policies and norms were identified by most participants (n=14) as a barrier to youth engagement. Agency policies and norms created barriers associated with not enough time to complete tasks, placement policies hindering youth voice, and laws (court orders and visitations) that dictate process rather than youth readiness.

The majority of participants (n=10) reported difficulty with colleagues or administration not valuing youth engagement and/or believing that the adults knew best in the situation. Lack of resources was described by participants (n=9) as not being adequately trained in youth engagement, lack of access to services and resources needed to engage youth, not having enough foster homes for placement choice, and lack of guidance on how effective communication with children and youth as well as other stakeholders. Lastly, participants (n=8) expressed concern with youth resisting engagement and not knowing how to proceed. Table X provides the definitions, frequencies, and representative quotes for the barriers in this section.

Table 4. Barriers to engagement

| Theme | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative quotes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agency policies / norms | | 14 | 93% | |
| Not enough time | Time constraints due to large caseloads, worker turnover, and policy/agency requirements. | 14 | 93% | *"[Workers are] overwhelmed with the caseloads that they have, the amount of work that is required per the state's policy that has to be completed."*<br><br>*"Our turnover has been rather high within the last two years I will say. It's definitely been high, like we have supervisors that are carrying caseloads"* |
| Placement policies | When placement policy supersedes youth voice. | 9 | 60% | *"When it comes to reunification, I don't know how many of our kids can say, hey, I don't want to go home."* |
| Laws (TPR, visitation, etc.) | Difficulties engaging youth due to barriers created by court orders, visitation policies, and wait times. | 9 | 60% | *"I also feel like we've got a lot of red tape with just the way our laws are lined out and the way a lot of people's hands are just tied on how cases can progress, should progress, will progress."* |

| Theme | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative quotes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mindset of workforce | | 10 | 67% | |
| Adultism | The belief that adults know better than a child or youth in any given situation. | 6 | 40% | *"I just don't know if they always listen to them, I guess. It's more like the adults are figuring this stuff out, and they're kind of a sidebar sometimes."* |
| Culture of safety/ protection | Fear that engaging the child or youth will dysregulate them or cause harm | 7 | 47% | *"[Sometimes] the social workers or staff are afraid to be honest with young people, especially, if they feel like something is bad news, because they think it will lead to dysregulation."* |
| Worker bias | Workers or supervisors are not supportive of youth engagement. | 3 | 20% | *"I have even seen where in both of my roles where if the worker does not, does not care for teens, teens are very smart. [The teens] pick up on who's genuine, who's not"* |

| Theme | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative quotes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lack of resources | | 9 | 60% | |
| Lack of community resources | Access to services and community resources is limited. | 4 | 27% | *"And I think also, probably for us rural Counties, not having as many services and supports for children is also a systematic issue."* |
| Lack of training | Workers are not trained on authentic youth engagement. | 5 | 33% | *"Even with new workers who are eager to get out in the field and have a relationship with their kids or with their families, they're not taught how."* |
| Not enough foster parents | The lack of placement options impedes the ability for the youth to have choices. | 4 | 27% | *"For most of our young people, placement decision is more based on what's available than it is about, where do you want to go?"* |
| Lack of structure for conversations | There is not a guidebook for what questions to ask and how to communicate with and between multiple stakeholders. | 4 | 27% | *"Ensuring that children and parents or guardians are hearing the same thing. And I think also, when we're looking at permanency, everybody being on the same page so that they have a good understanding, and there isn't any triangulating."* |
| Youth does not want / is not able to engage | Youth are resistant to engaging with the worker. | 8 | 53% | *"Where I get stuck is when I get a kid that just is not willing to partner with what we're able to do, maybe they ghost us because they don't need us today."* |

## Agency policies and norms

Agency policy norms included the following themes: not enough time (n=11), placement policies (n=9), and laws (n=9), all of which were barriers to authentically engaging youth in practice.

### Not enough time

Time constraints are a significant barrier for child welfare professionals. Eleven out of the 15 participants reported concerns with having time to complete their job tasks with quality. This was especially true when describing their ability to engage youth. When asked if youth were engaged in the treatment planning one participant stated, *"as long as I didn't forget it was due and I'm rushing to get it in, I'll sit down and write their treatment plan with them."* (3) There are three main themes that arose describing the causes of time constraints: caseload size (n=10), policy and requirements (n=10), and worker turnover (n=13).

### Caseload size

Participants (n=10) described having large caseloads which impeded them from having time to truly engage with each child/youth.

- "[Workers are] overwhelmed with the caseloads that they have, the amount of work that is required per the state's policy that has to be completed. So I'm not going to say [youth engagement] is not a priority, but it's, I guess they don't feel as though it's something that's as important as other things that they have to complete."

- "The caseload sizes that we have and have had are substantial. They're far from ideal for allowing the relationships to be built that should be built so that we can have those ideal relationship, an authentic involvement from us and from the people we serve."

- "By engaging the way I want to with youth, that requires me to work late, work on the weekends."

***Policy and reporting requirements***

 Child welfare professionals are required to comply with many policies and practice standards. Participants (n=10) described the copious amounts of paperwork as a hinderance to relationship building and youth engagement.

- "I didn't realize until a couple of months into working that I was spending probably three times the amount of time as my coworkers doing home visits. And I was having trouble keeping up with the other requirements of the job, the paperwork, the report writing, but it was obvious that I had a much better relationship with the children on my caseload."

- "I feel like some of the paperwork and things that we do is just overly repetitive, that really doesn't help the kids. Again, it's mandated, but I think that some of it is a little over the top"

In addition to paperwork, participants described the impact of mandated process and procedures on youth engagement. Specifically around designated timelines to accomplish tasks within any given case, "We don't necessarily have the time that it takes to engage a family or a child because court reports are due, or mandates are required." These requirements limit a worker's ability to truly engage the child/youth throughout the process.

- "We're so inundated with processes and procedures and policies"

- "I think it starts with us being able to create an environment that actually allows people to be able to genuinely engage someone. But it's kind of hard to do that when you know you've got a lot of other mandates expected of you."

- "The average worker spends an hour a month with a kid, one hour a month. They go in, they visit, they see them. And so that's 12 hours a year that they're invested in that kid. That's half a day. Out of 365 days, the average worker is spending half a day with the kids in their caseload.

And I don't know that a lot of change is going to take place on 12 hours out of the year."

### Worker turnover

Worker turnover is a major concern across the country. Participants (n=13) stated the high turnover rate has impacted the number of cases one worker is responsible for and decreased time for engagement. One state reported the turnover rate was at 47%. One of the reasons provided for high turnover was the frustration felt by workers. A participant stated, *"I think a lot of times when staff leave our agency, it's because they are tired of kind of banging their head against the wall, trying to get people within the system to hear the kids, to let them have a voice."* (13) below are several quotes that describe worker turnover.

- "Our turnover has been rather high within the last two years I will say. It's definitely been high, like we have supervisors that are carrying caseloads"

- "Our workforce is so diminished right now. Everybody's doing triple duty, so it's really hard to hold case workers to a high standard for engagement with youth when they're doing three other jobs at the same time."

- "When a kid is getting a new worker every month or his worker doesn't come because that worker is tied down, so they send somebody else, it's difficult for authentic engagement to take place."

### Placement policies

Another barrier to youth engagement is placement policies. Participants (n=9) described the child/youth's voice is superseded by the policies in place. An example was if a child/youth requested not to be placed with their sibling. The participant stated, *"unless there's some kind of sexual abuse allegation or something like that, we do have that policy in place that we are supposed to place with siblings, if at all possible".* Another difficulty is trying to balance youth engagement with the requirements of placement such as

court mandates, reunification, and safety. Lastly, there is concern over the location of placements impeding the ability to fully engage youth. Below are quotes that help describe this.

- "When it comes to reunification, I don't know how many of our kids can say, hey, I don't want to go home. I know we have had some, but for the most part I think that when reunification or return parent or even placement with a relative is done, I think the placement has got the priority on the engagement than the young person does."

- "Young people who are 17 and younger have to be in a licensed placement. That's licensed by our agency or licensed by our provider that we have a contract with."

- "It's harder with younger children to do that just because they don't necessarily understand the process, they don't understand exactly what is happening to them. Or if you ask them, where would you want to live? And they say mommy and daddy, and mommy and daddy haven't completed the things that the court has ordered for them, we can't just say, oh, okay, you'll go to mommy and daddy. Because that would potentially still be an unsafe situation."

- "Some of these visits that we're doing are like four or five hours away from our county base. You're trying to see all these kids make sure that they're safe, but at the same time, you're not being able to sit and really engage with them like you would like to."

- "[There is a] compliance view of treatment planning as opposed to a relationship building lens. Sometimes it really becomes check the box as opposed to sort of looking at more qualitative things that are happening."

In addition, to difficulty with youth engagement during the placement planning process, participants (n=2) reported concern that placement moves were sometimes used as a consequence for youth behavior rather than focusing on establishing permanency.

- "I think the system sometimes uses placement moves as a consequence for dysregulated behavior as opposed to thinking of, for example,

residential placement as a really strategic intervention to get someone to permanency. And I think that the system sometimes fails to look at the whole family."

### *Laws (TPR, visitation, etc)*

Participants (n=9) described two main concern areas with laws: court orders and visitation. Participants described how difficult it was to truly engage with children, youth, and families especially when reunification is the primary goal, and the child welfare professional is also required to report to the court. Finding that balance of supporter and reporter is hard and that causes child welfare professionals to leave the field. Participants also described the policy's that are in place that dictate when the child/youth are required to have a say. This can feel abrupt for some children and youth who were not being engaged prior to the mandated time.

- "Our role is to reunify, but at the same time we are court ordered by law to provide information to the courts. So it's a difficult relationship to navigate, and so that does lead to a lot of worker turnover."

- "I also feel like we've got a lot of red tape with just the way our laws are lined out and the way a lot of people's hands are just tied on how cases can progress, should progress, will progress. And we find ourselves saying, "Well, that's what the law tells us we have to do."

- "At 14, all of a sudden we start asking them, "Do you want to be adopted? Do you want to just do some independent living things?"

Additionally, child welfare professionals reported that court mandated visitation, safety concerns, and competing schedules often overshadow the child/youth voice. This was particularly true for one size fits all thinking when it comes to safety with one participant pointing out that the meaning of safety evolves throughout the child's/youth's development.

- "We try to definitely keep them safe in their visitation and hear what they want. Some of them are court-mandated, so they might not have as much say."

Visitation, it's a difficult topic, I think there's just so many variables to consider, including the child or youth schedule. Often they have many providers and services in place and it's not really ever seen as something that's an option, it's something that's ordered for them to do.

- "Safety for a three- or four-year-old looks very different than safety for a 17- or 18-year-old. And so decisions about whether you can see birth family, for example, should be different depending on a young person age, even if the circumstance of the parent isn't different."

Lastly, some participants reported the limited availability of judges means longer wait times/delays that can work directly against the child/youth's goal.

- "We only have one judge that does all the child welfare stuff versus one county might have six judges. So if you only have that one judge, a lot of times he's delayed on a lot of things like getting you a court order that you need. Or if a court hearing got counsel, for whatever reason, it might not be six months or seven months down the road until you get a new date."

## Mindset of Child Welfare and workforce

Another barrier described in the interview's centers around the mindset of those who work within child welfare. Overall, 10 participants discussed three areas of concern with current mindsets in child welfare: differing views on importance of youth engagement, adultism, and fear that engagement with the child or youth may cause harm.

Participants (n=3) talked about the difficulty working with peers, supervisors, and partnering agencies that have differing views on the importance of youth voice and youth engagement. Participants described frustration with the those in positions of power ignoring their advocacy efforts to lift and center youth voices. One participant expressed difficulty getting the *"supervisor to understand the importance of engaging youth and*

*building a relationship with the children"* due to the focus on completing the required tasks.

- "I have even seen where in both of my roles where if the worker does not, does not care for teens, teens are very smart. [The teens] pick up on who's genuine, who's not"

- "Probably the biggest challenge is interacting with others who are not on the same page as we are. Because we're there saying, this is what the kid needs, they're telling us they need this, and then you run up the against people who have the power to make decisions, like about meetings or about their placement or things like that, and they're not on the same page as us."

An adultist mindset is another barrier to authentic youth engagement. Adultism is the belief adults know better than a child or youth in any given situation. Participants (n=6) described witnessing or indicating adultism is occurring. Adultism was described particularly when discussing the age and developmental ability of the child/youth. Workforce reported with the younger children / youth, the adults were really making the decisions for the child/youth. This was in part due to the belief that the youth were not able to be full participants in the planning due to developmental age/stage. Additionally, participants described adults understood the situation better and knew the right direction to move in to promote the health and wellness of the child/youth better than the child/youth. This lends to the importance of understanding how to engage youth authentically at every age and developmental stage. The participants did note that the older mindset of "children being seen and not heard" is antiquated and the kids today do not think that way.

The following quotes are representative of the adultist mindset:

- "For the littler kids, I think that there's probably a lot of workers who think this five-year-old isn't going to be able to tell me what they want, what they need, what they want to see going forward. And so not even trying to have those conversations"

- "We look at the age appropriateness for any discussions that are going to be had in the court proceedings... I try very hard to judge which children are at a stage where it's appropriate to involve them."

- "I just don't know if they always listen to them, I guess. It's more like the adults are figuring this stuff out, and they're kind of a sidebar sometimes."

- "No, I don't think that this is good for this kid, because they might get ideas of stuff they can do, and we don't want to get the wrong thoughts in their heads."

Participants (n=7) described a concern over youth becoming dysregulated due to engagement with the process. The idea that children and youth are fragile, and it is better to not include them in the plans so as not to upset the child/youth further is being used as a reason to not engage the child or youth. Along the lines of not wanting to upset the child, participants discussed the detrimental impact of unfulfilled promises made by child welfare professionals. Participants did report that building relationships and being authentic with the youth would prevent that from happening. The following are quotes that describe this process.

- "Transition age youth, when they're getting ready to transition out of care, we have some concerns that we've had youth that want to have a meeting with all of their providers and their family and their... and want to come up with a good plan. I think we've sometimes been denied having that meeting, because they don't want to stir the pot. It's like, the kids in care, let's not talk about out this, which is a concern to us."

- "[Sometimes] the social workers or staff are afraid to be honest with young people, especially, if they feel like something is bad news, because they think it will lead to dysregulation."

- "If you've got a kid that's had eight, nine, 10 different case managers, some of those conversations fall through the cracks, it gets lost in translation. One worker will say, "Yes, absolutely. We'll do that." And then couple weeks later they leave, or they get a promotion, or whatever. And

the next worker has no idea that conversation happened. And then this gets like, "See, you guys just lie. Nobody's going to do these things for me."

- "I had a worker who had the best intentions, and she promised this kid everything, every time she talked to him, and her intention was to do everything she said, but she never did anything. [the child] was so conditioned. He's like, "Yeah, my worker's going to do. But she probably won't."

## Lack of Resources and training

Two thirds of participants (n=10) discussed how lack of resources and training impeded the child/youth engage in placement and case planning decisions and goals. Best practices were also impeded by the low availability of placement opportunities as well as the lack of training opportunities to assist child welfare professionals in fully engaging the youth on their caseloads.

### *Not enough foster homes*

Participants (n=4) described difficulty providing opportunity for youth voice in placement decisions. This was evident especially when there were lack of options for placement for the child/youth. The following quote demonstrates this.

- "For most of our young people, placement decision is more based on what's available than it is about, where do you want to go? I don't know that there's very many cases at all if I would go, hey, look, here's three foster homes. Which one would you like to go to? That probably never happens. It's probably more like, hey, I think I have this family that will take this kid, or hey, I think this program will take them."

Participants also presented the lack of available foster homes as a barrier to placing sibling groups together.

- "We try our very hardest to keep siblings together in the same home and if we don't have one home that can take each of them, we do work hard as an agency to place them within different homes within our agency"

- "We really, really, really try to keep siblings together if we can, and we have a home. If we cannot I may look at like, "Well, I've got two homes that could take the three kids." And try and figure out how to at least get them in homes within the same agency so that it's easier for them to remain connected to siblings.

Another concern with the limited availability of foster homes is the distance from the point of origin for that child/youth. Children and youth that are placed outside of their county of care have a harder time building relational permanency as well as being able to fully participate in required steps towards reunification.

- "I think 50% of the foster youth in the State of Alabama are placed outside of their county of care."

### *Lack of Community Resources / Providers*

Participants (n=6) describe issues with access funds in a timely manner, difficulty with between agency communication, access to supports and services, and connection youth to their cultural community. For example, participants described delays in obtaining funds for their children and youth.

- "They have funds that are available. So we have to complete a referral, submit the referral. For example, a service that they can pay for is driver's training. We can do the referral; I'll use today as example [February]. It's possible, the referral will not be approved until September."

Access to services and supports as well as a connection to cultural communities is also described as a barrier to youth engagement.

- "And I think also, probably for us rural Counties, not having as many services and supports for children is also a systematic issue."

- "[the ability to provide cultural permanency] A lot of that comes down to, again, availability, what resources are available."

### *Lack of structure for conversations*

Participants (n=4) reported a need for greater communication between child welfare professionals, children and youth, parents or guardians, and agencies. Participants discussed the concern with children and youth hearing a different version of the story than the parents/guardians which leads to confusion and frustration. Clear messaging is important for all parties to be on the same page.

- "Ensuring that children and parents or guardians are hearing the same thing. And I think also, when we're looking at permanency, everybody being on the same page so that they have a good understanding, and there isn't any triangulating."

Additionally, participants discussed how they are not really able to prepare the youth for the future because they have to follow the designated pathway, even if they can see it will be disrupted and they will have to change course. This leads to the child/youth being blindsided by changes.

- "If a case permanency plan changes from just reunification and they add a concurrent plan of termination, I have seen, more often than not, that's not ever discussed with kids… They're not really having those conversations with them until we get to the point where termination is actually happening, and adoption is really a conversation. And it almost feels like we're just not even allowed to talk about the possibilities and what ifs until that plan has changed. And the kids are definitely not brought in to that conversation early on."

Another concern is the communication between agencies that are serving the children, youth, and families. This lack of effective communication between agencies leads to challenges with engaging youth in services and attaining goals.

- "I think the best way to put it would be lack of communication and information available. As a private agency, as a private LCPA, we partner with DCS of course and there are wonderful people who work for both organizations who are doing everything they can to help children and families. When there is a lack of communication on either end either the [agency] or DCS or with other providers that creates just a whole lot of challenges for our children, ultimately."

### *Lack of training*

Training is an integral part of any workforce. When examining barriers it became apparent that participants (n=5) felt they were not provided the training needed to be successful in their role. Further, they expressed concern over those who are new to the field were not adequately prepared to handle the tasks that are required as well as knowing how to authentically engage with the child/youth. Participants stated the lack of knowledge and skills impedes the ability to effectively engage children and youth. Particularly around determining how to appropriately engage children and youth at each age and developmental stage. Participants described their uncertainty with their skills and utilizing peers and other professionals to support youth engagement.

- "One [area] that we do need to improve on, is that engagement is helpful when we understand the importance of it and we understand how and have strategies of how to engage."

- "Even with new workers who are eager to get out in the field and have a relationship with their kids or with their families, they're not taught how. It's more so they're taught how to do paperwork, but they're not taught how to engage with different age groups or what some might label as a difficult child is really not a difficult child."

- "When we hire foster care workers, they have to go through a nine-week CWTI training. However, during the training, they don't learn everything that needs to be learned to, I guess, effectively complete this job. Honestly, being a foster care worker, it takes a good solid year to fully

get a good understanding of what needs to be done, to understand policies and how to move forward. Nine weeks is not teaching anyone what needs to be done."

## Youth does not want / is not able to be engaged

The last barrier is youth who are resistant to engagement with the child welfare professional. Participants (n=8) reported they were not sure how to engage with youth who were resistant to working with them. Participants understood why some youth would not want to engage with them such as experience with "empty promises" from workers, never finding/giving up on finding on a permanent placement, and traumatic life experiences.

- "The fact that you're in a position of authority. No matter what, that is the system. And so, building trust and rapport sometimes takes longer. Getting them to understand that you're not there, you're not the bad guy, you're not trying to be that person, I think that's probably the biggest fear. That and the fact that most of them, with what they've gone through, they're definitely... Oppositional defiance is a pretty accurate term for a lot of teens. You want them to do one thing, they're going to do the opposite."

- "A lot of those kinds of life experiences [human trafficking] really affect the kid and their ability to have positive healthy relationships with others. I think that being able to engage with them, that makes it that much more difficult."

- "There are some kids that just, they don't want to have anything to do with us, you're CPS, you're going to just come in to take me. I can see that as systemic because they have that mindset, it's been ingrained in them, don't ever talk to CPS, they'll just come and take you away. All of those things which is probably generational in those families. But not being able to kind of bridge that barrier with those kids prevents them from being actively involved in their case if they just don't want to have anything to do with us."

- "A older youth, might be a little bit resistant like yeah, I have no interest in exploring the idea of family, because family has never worked for me. And so then that can be challenging. And there's a lot of work that needs to be done to really understand what that's about, but the work to understand what it's about requires authentic engagement."

- "Where I get stuck is when I get a kid that just is not willing to partner with what we're able to do, maybe they ghost us because they don't need us today. So we don't hear from them or they don't respond to us or make it difficult to make contact. And so it makes it difficult. And so then they come back when there's a crisis and then it's difficult at that point. And I don't think that's just a foster kid thing. I think that's just a kid thing. But I think that as an administrator, that's one of the challenges that I feel like my staff faces is just getting that ongoing response."

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO PROMOTE ENGAGEMENT

Twelve out of the 15 child welfare professionals that were interviewed (80%) stated that training and an increase in hiring was critical to effectively engage youth. Hiring helps ensure that child welfare professionals have time to do youth engagement and training is needed to help explain to workers how to talk to youth and help them take greater control over their own lives. Eleven of the 15 participants also indicated that reducing caseloads was necessary for child welfare professionals to have the time that is needed to build trusting relationships.

Eight of the 15 noted that supervision was an important component of promoting youth engagement and helped ensure child welfare professionals have the support they need to address challenges they experience in the field. Seven of the 15 also indicated that organizations need to embrace the principles of youth engagement and make it an integral part of organizational culture while six pointed specifically to the need for policy that requires child welfare professionals to engage youth in placement and permanency planning. Participants (n=4) also pointed to the importance of providing youth with options when engaging them while three indicated that

increasing pay and improving working conditions would lead to increased worker satisfaction, retention, and a sustained commitment to youth engagement. Two of the 15 also specifically stated that increased resources were needed to ensure that services are available that can assist youth as well as child welfare professionals.

Table 5. Recommendations to promote youth engagement

| Theme | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative Quote |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Increase hiring/training | Hire more workers and ensure they are trained in youth engagement. | 12 | 80% | *"Getting all those people trained and then supporting them so that they stay so that our caseloads can go back to that manageable size, I think would be the best thing. When we're fully staffed and fully functioning, then it seems like we just do better work overall, whether that's youth engagement or getting services set."* |
| More time to build relationships, smaller caseload | Smaller caseloads create more time for authentic youth engagement. | 11 | 73% | *"Again, I would go back to making sure that our staff are trained, but also having high caseloads. If you have high caseloads, you can't give that one-on-one attention to making sure that you're engaging families and children's the way that you need to."* |

| Theme | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative Quote |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Supervision | Supervisors can promote youth engagement through instruction and coaching | 8 | 53% | *"When we do not have these challenges, we definitely participate in home visits with staff... you coach them along with things and to assist them and help them improve."* |
| Institutionalize commitment to youth voice/partnership | Create organizational culture that promotes youth engagement and a commitment to partnering with youth. | 7 | 47% | *"Allowing young people to share their voice and making them a priority in their plans. And I think that comes from the administration down. I think that it's not just your county staff that's trying to do it, or a foster parent. It's got to be every level recognizing the need for youth engagement and every level recognizing how we can constantly have that voice in front of us."* |
| Policy change | Create policy that requires youth engagement. | 6 | 40% | *"I don't know how different agencies or different systems or states, how their laws or policies can change the abilities for different workers to engage with youth, but I think it's really important."* |

| Theme | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative Quote |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Provide youth with options | Explaining permanency options to youth promotes engagement and compliance. | 4 | 27% | *"Within reason, we have to give them choices and options."* |
| Worker pay/working conditions | Increasing pay leads to greater retention of workers trained in youth engagement | 3 | 20% | *"I don't think that even with that 20% raise that we are still paid what would be fair according to the jobs that we do."* |
| Increase resources/services | Increase funding to ensure workers have time and resources needed for effective youth engagement. | 2 | 13% | *"The funding, if there was no issues with funding, then some of these challenges would definitely be resolved."* |

## Worker training/hiring

Hiring more workers to reduce caseloads and providing training specifically on youth engagement were frequently cited together as key strategies for increasing youth engagement.

### *Hiring*

Participants frequently mentioned the need to hire more child welfare professionals when they were asked what should be done to promote greater youth engagement. Clearly, one primary barrier to increasing engagement was the overwhelming caseloads of many workers. Participants often explained they were committed to youth engagement, but needed more time to talk to and engage youth.

- "Workers need to have a manageable caseload. I think that workers need to have the support of their management team, that they can bring for the voice of the youth and themselves to create ideas that will be supported by staff when at all possible."

- "One point I want to make is I think in some agencies or child welfare, there is a high turnover and it's hard work. And so I think we aren't getting as many properly trained case managers who have experience and training working from a social work practice and perspective and a trauma-informed perspective."

- "When we're fully staffed and fully functioning, then it seems like we just do better work overall, whether that's youth engagement or getting services set up or engagement with the families."

### *Training*

Participants frequently pointed to the need for training when asked to explain effective ways of promoting youth engagement. Trauma-informed techniques and cultural competence were both viewed as especially important topics for training curricula designed to train workers to engage

diverse youth who sometimes struggle emotionally because of past abuse and neglect.

- "The child welfare system has to get really clear that youth engagement is truly a core value. And then it needs to train its staff to that. And the training needs to be followed up by coaching and consulting so that there really is true uptake, doing one or two sessions of a training, and then thinking, somebody knows how to do youth engagement and then never holding them accountable to it, is not going to support implementation."

- "I think workers having large caseloads. I think it's training. I think if we have better training in regard to engagement, and why it's so important, that we would have better success in providing engagement."

- "Getting all those people trained and then supporting them so that they stay so that our caseloads can go back to that manageable size, I think would be the best thing. When we're fully staffed and fully functioning, then it seems like we just do better work overall, whether that's youth engagement or getting services set."

## Smaller caseload/More time to build relationships

Consistent with the findings described above, 11 of the 15 participants indicated that they need smaller caseloads, so they have more time to build relationships with youth.

- "Again, I would go back to making sure that our staff are trained, but also having high caseloads. If you have high caseloads, you can't give that one-on-one attention to making sure that you're engaging families and children's the way that you need to."

- "I see the benefit in my region of case managers being able to have contact is because they do have manageable caseload size. So I guess that would be the answer, is a manageable caseload. But I also think that there does need to be opportunities for training, because that is an area that is something that I see as one that we do need to improve on, is that

engagement is helpful when we understand the importance of it and we understand how and have strategies of how to engage."

- "Not having the time to build the relationship you want with youth. One example is, when I first started doing case work with foster children, I didn't realize until a couple of months into working that I was spending probably three times the amount of time as my coworkers doing home visits. And I was having trouble keeping up with the other requirements of the job, the paperwork, the report writing, but it was obvious that I had a much better relationship with the children on my caseload."

## Supervision

Supervision was cited by eight of the 15 participants when asked what could be done to promote youth engagement. Some participants explained that it was helpful for supervisors to coach them when doing youth engagement in the field while others mentioned the value of consulting with supervisors, particularly when youth were difficult to engage.

- "I think the training would have the ability for, like I said, in the previous question, having a supervisor or somebody doing the training to be able to give you live feedback or sit in on your meeting with a child or observe you doing a home visit and offer advice or just different ways of doing things."

- "I'll always ask if a supervisor or somebody higher up is involved. I'll always ask after how did you think I engaged the family? What do you think I could have done differently? And that has been the most helpful for me, definitely. Because they can give you insight that you probably weren't even aware of, especially in those stressful situations too, where you're trying to do all these things, you're trying to work with the family or the child and that's your main focus so you may not notice some of those small things."

- "Staff in these cases with their supervisors being honest about what's going on in the cases or what's going on with that child. What I like in our

county is that we meet once a month to discuss permanency in the county. Meaning, we staff all the cases with the director of the program supervisor and it's the worker and the supervisor in that conference room. And every month we're discussing what's going on with this case, what are the next steps?"

## Institutionalize opportunities for youth voice /partnership

Seven of the 15 participants also mentioned the need to institutionalize commitment to youth engagement by getting buy in from the highest levels of their organizations while working to ensure that youth engagement is fully integrated into organizational culture.  This could help create an environment in which child welfare professionals increase their efforts to partner with youth.

- "Modeling youth engagement, allowing young people to share their voice and making them a priority in their plans. And I think that comes from the administration down. I think that it's not just your county staff that's trying to do it, or a foster parent. It's got to be every level recognizing the need for youth engagement and every level recognizing how we can constantly have that voice in front of us."

- "I've also noticed the... a practice change for youth engagement, and it's in our permanency round tables, which is where our children that have been involved in care for permanency are focused on specifically to try to drive for permanency. About four or five years ago, there was a component added to give children a voice, where children actually have a video where they discuss what they want to see for themselves as it relates to permanency. And that video is played statewide when stakeholders are looking to obtain permanency for children so that that child's role and voice can be heard as that team tries to take the more challenging or difficult cases that have been sought to achieve permanency. That child's voice, who they are, can be given weight when engaging in that process before going forward. That's all."

## Policy change

Six participants explained that there was a need for policy change to institutionalize commitment to youth engagement. This could be especially useful to child welfare professionals when supervisors are not supportive of time-consuming youth engagement efforts or when colleagues are resistant to using the approach due to personal biases or resistance to learning new techniques.

- "I don't know how different agencies or different systems or states, how their laws or policies can change the abilities for different workers to engage with youth, but I think it's really important that case workers building a relationship with children is encouraged."

- "I think from the state agency perspective, state agencies could use their procurement practices to incorporate contractual obligations and expectations from an organization. So you don't get awarded a contract for a group home for teenagers, if you don't have intentional practices to incorporate youth engagement."

## Provide youth with options

One overarching theme that came up during interviews was that, while options for youth in the child welfare system are often limited, it is important to give them options when possible and pragmatic. This communicates to youth that child welfare professionals are trying to guide them and partner with them rather than simply dictating what they should do, thereby giving youth a greater sense of autonomy that helps them overcome feelings of powerlessness.

- "Within reason, we have to give them choices and options. And I really feel like that that gives them the best chance of coming out of this as unscathed as possible."

- "When you can give them the options, leave the decisions open to them. When they have something they want, like an objective or goal that they

want to complete, laying out everything in front of them so they can see what's required to actually meet that goal."

**Worker pay/working conditions**

Worker pay was also cited by three participants as a factor that could help motivate workers and one which was important in retention efforts.

- "Our agency has some efforts recently to increase pay for workers, hopefully to retain workers and to attract additional so that the caseload size isn't so tremendous."

- "More pay always incentivizes people, it engages people. More trainings, morale boosting, I don't think they can do anything about the timelines. Those are mandates and laws at this point. I guess those are the ones that I feel like can affect change or the staff, the staffing ones."

**Increase funding for services**

In addition to the need for more time to do youth engagement, two child welfare professionals also cited a need for more funding for services, particularly those that help to ease the burden of a large caseload.

- "I think increased funds for services, and I think a better awareness of what exactly is the desired outcome is also important."

- "I think also increased services and supports financially for rural communities to ensure that children's needs can be met locally is really important."

## SUGGESTIONS FOR STAFF TRAINING

The need for training was a common theme throughout the interviews. One participant summed it up well:

- "I think that our supervisors and our staff would like the tools to know how to be able to do that and what is expected of them. And I think our

supervisors would want to know how to coach staff through those opportunities and how to support our staff."

Workers and supervisors alike want to be successful in their role. During the interview participants were asked if they had received a training on youth engagement. About half of participants (53%) reported having attended a youth engagement training, while 40% indicated they had not received youth engagement training. The remaining 6% indicated that they received a little training on youth engagement but not enough to count as a full training.

Participants also talked about the importance of organizational changes that are needed in addition to training. One participant stated *"as with any kind of practice, simply going in and training it without actually grounding it in the values of the organization, like really explicitly and really revisiting those values and talking about them all the time. If you simply do trainings, it's not sustainable. It has to be part of the culture of the organization."* It is important to keep in mind that organizational change will need to occur in order to effectively train and implement youth engagement. The need for organizational change is evident when reading through barriers such as high caseloads and worker turnover. Additionally, one participant reported needing to know *"how to balance the needs of what a kiddo is wanting or needing or is expressing to you that they would like done with the needs of the agency and our laws".* Therefore, in addition to the training of how to engage youth, understanding the agency policies and laws that govern the ability to engage with that youth becomes an important piece for sustainability.

It is also important to note that throughout discussions around training, participants (n=7) repeatedly brought up the importance of partnering with children and youth so they can help the adults understand the benefits of youth engagement and what that engagement may look like.

- "I think by showing case workers, supervisors, administrators, that this came kind of directly from youth is going to give us more buy-in to any

sort of a curriculum or a training. So I think really engaging them from the very beginning is very vital."

- "It's really important to hear from the youth, what we should be training. I think getting their input and ideas of what they want us to hear and what they want us to learn would be invaluable."

- "I find this is helpful when you're doing any training, is hearing from the youth themselves, situations where they felt hurt and where they didn't feel hurt, because I think that makes it an authentic training, that there's a reason behind this."

- "Ideally, I would want to hear from youth who had graduated from foster care, who could tell us about their experiences so that we could take it and learn from them, what went well, what didn't go well, what could we have done better? What did we do well in support that individual? I think that would be very powerful."

Many training topics were proposed by participants with several consistent topic areas across interviews. These training topic areas include the 'importance and benefits of youth engagement', 'relationship building', 'developmentally appropriate engagement', 'cultural competency', 'communication skills', 'managing youth resistance', 'trauma-informed', and 'brain development'. See Table 5 for a breakdown of suggestions for staff training.

Table 5. Suggestions for staff training

| Theme | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative quote |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Training topics | | 15 | 100% | |
| Importance and benefits of youth engagement | Providing a clear understanding of why youth engagement is needed | 10 | 67% | *"I think if we have better training in regard to engagement, and why it's so important, that we would have better success in providing engagement."* |
| Relationship building | Understanding how relationship building is a foundation of child and youth engagement | 7 | 47% | *"I think also some TBRI components are very important, because I think when you understand trust and how to build trust, that allows people to engage appropriately."* |
| Developmentally appropriate engagement | How does the developmental age and stage of the child/youth impact engagement | 7 | 47% | *"I would include a segment on brain development. Because depending on where a child is developmentally, the work is going to look different."* |
| Cultural competence | Recognizing bias and understanding how culture impacts youth engagement | 5 | 33% | *"What does it look like to explore culture, identity? How to talk through and work through biases. So strategies on that as well as the benefits of engagement and how to develop those* |

*working plans that comes from authentic engagement."*

| Theme | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative quote |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Communication skills | Knowing how to have difficult conversations and elicit information from children and youth | 5 | 33% | *"And it's also common for us, as workers or adults, to guess how kids are feeling and getting insight of what the child is feeling or what they know about the case."* |
| Managing youth resistance | Strategies to engage youth and understanding causes of resistance | 4 | 27% | *"Strategies about what to do if someone's not engaged or they are just not in the mood to talk today."* |
| Trauma informed | Understanding the impact of trauma on youth engagement and relationship building | 3 | 20% | *"I think that number one, it's got to be trauma informed."* |

| Theme | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative quote |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Delivery modality | | 15 | 100% | |
| In person | Trainings that occur in-person | 15 | 100% | "In person. I think we lose a whole human element and connection if we are not in person." |
| Virtual (live with trainer) | Trainings that occur virtually with a live trainer (example: over Zoom) | 4 | 27% | "I think there has to be an in-person element to it for people to practice with the tools and have practice conversations. I think it can be done remotely, though I would say that couldn't be asynchronous. The practice has to be, it might be able to be remote, but it has to be synchronous because there has to be exchange." |
| Virtual (asynchronous) | Virtual training such as a webinar, video, or online class that does not have a live component | 3 | 20% | "Yeah, I would not mind having a list of things, Websites, or books, or webinars that, if I had questions about things or was like, "I really, I'm just curious about how this goes." That I could just log onto and do at night" |

| Theme | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative quote |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Delivery method | | 9 | 60% | |
| Concrete / realistic examples | Training provides real live examples and strategies for practice | 7 | 47% | *"I think concrete examples and understanding the... going back to that reason why, why it's so important, and the data behind how we can ensure that that's important."* |
| Role plays | Acting out / practicing strategies during training sessions in order to build skills | 4 | 27% | *"Role playing, which I think helps them to think about, when I'm in a family's home and this situation is presented to me, how am I going to continue to work with that youth, continue to build that relationship with them so they're not just walking in and not having any idea what to expect."* |

## Training Topics

### *Importance and benefits of youth engagement*

The majority of participants (n=10) expressed workers need to know and understand the importance and benefits of youth engagement. Understanding the importance is critical when asking an already overloaded workforce to take the time to build relationships, inform youth of options available, elicit information from the youth on their desires, and truly partner with them in order to assist them in reaching their goals.

- "I think in that particular training, it was about why it is important to engage youth in their case planning processes."

- "I also think that there does need to be opportunities for training, because that is an area that is something that I see as one that we do need to improve on, is that engagement is helpful when we understand the importance of it, and we understand how and have strategies of how to engage."

- "I think if we have better training in regard to engagement, and why it's so important, that we would have better success in providing engagement."

- "I think definite training on the impacts of engaging kids from the start, how that could be beneficial and the best ways to do it while still staying in line with what we have to do on a legal front."

- "Consistent training, hands on training is step one. Helping our staff to feel more comfortable with what they do, just ongoing leadership development, developing our staff, developing our foster parents."

### *Relationship building*

Clear communication is a crucial part of the relationship building process. Children and youth need to understand their power in the situation as well as the responsibilities and role of the child welfare professional in order to fully partner with a worker. Participants (n=7) discussed a need to have training that focusses on building relationships with the children and youth that they serve. Participants understood that before any real progress can be made, trust and relationship have to be built to demonstrate to the youth that the child welfare professional is their advocate and working toward ensuring their wellbeing. A part of building that relationship is getting to know who the child/youth is through utilizing active listening, focused attention, and attunement to the child/youth. The following quotes describe the importance of relationship building and what trainings may be available.

- "It has always been recommended trust based relational intervention training. I have been dying to do the training myself and I've heard great,

great things about it. It's trauma informed and it's all about being able to build trust to change behaviors and heal from trauma"

- "I think the training itself would have to be very hands on and a lot of involvement to get to know the kids and in different arenas, not just in a foster home, not just at a visit, not just at school, not just in a relationship with a therapist, but making sure to engage at those different venues so that you can see the child in different areas and learn more about them."

- "I feel like our staff would benefit from learning about strategies to engage, strategies like being present, in the moment, strategies about like even how to develop your schedule. If you're going to take a day to meet with kids, maybe it's not best to book all your visits in one day. Because those who are probably at your afternoon shift... If you did a nine, 10, and 11 o'clock visit, those that are on your one, two, or three are probably not going to get a very attentive and attuned case manager. They're probably going to get the, okay, let's get this over with kid."

- "Interpersonal communication and being able to show empathy and understanding. And then being able to keep that in mind with all your interactions with that kid if you know their history and you've become familiar with them."

- "We have continual training, as well, as the supervisors here in the office to just better support your staff and how you can... Different ways of doing that. And part of that is not only building those relationships with the children and youth on your caseload, but also with the parents and maybe the relative caregivers or foster parents, all of those types of situations. And so I feel like I have those skills to train and coach them."

- "I think also some TBRI components are very important, because I think when you understand trust and how to build trust, that allows people to engage appropriately. But I think it's something that you have to keep revisiting, also. It's not a one-time training. It's something that you need to be doing consistently to make sure that people are building off the skills that they have."

### *Developmentally appropriate engagement*

It is very clear that there are laws and policies in place of how and at what age youth are to be engaged in their care. Participants (n=7) discussed the deficits of these artificial timelines and wanted more training around how to engage children and youth at each age/stage in a developmentally appropriate way.

- "I think there needs to be some discussion, too, that there's not a magic number. I don't know why we gravitate to this 14 and 16. My eight-year-old wants to make decisions all day and we let her, so I don't know why that is stripped from our younger kids, and possibly finding a way and finding the best way to engage with them, to pull them into their own care."

- "So for adolescent brain development, you're trying to do work that is pushing them back toward a family at a moment in time developmentally when maybe they're wired to be moving away from family. So staff really need to understand like basic brain development. They need to understand what healthy risk taking is, because we know that for healthy brain development teenagers need to take risks."

- "I would include a segment on brain development. Because depending on where a child is developmentally, the work is going to look different."

- "What is youth engagement? Why is it important? Maybe how brain development affects it? So the basic, what I call almost like kind of theory, academic stuff."

- "We also do a training on the art of process. That's what it's called. And the idea behind it is that we can't just tell a kid to do something. How do I help that kid to process the information that they have? How do I help them to process what they need to do?"

In addition to developmentally appropriate two participants expressed a desire for specialized training for engaging youth with mental health disorders. Understanding the developmental stages and how they may be

impacted by the mental health of the child or youth will assist the child welfare professional in understanding how to engage with that child or youth.

- "I would want to have specialized training for how to engage all types of youth, whether it be a child who has ADHD versus a child who has trauma like so that you're able and equipped to engage with all types of youth."

### *Cultural Competence*

Staff who display cultural humility are able to engage with youth from a diverse set of backgrounds and understand how to continually reflect and take action to address biases. Participants (n=5) reported various types of culture that child welfare professionals needed to be aware of. This included race and LGBTQ culture, however, participants also discussed the culture of young people and culture around criminality and substance use. Participants expressed an importance to learn about the various cultures and how to recognize bias within themselves and others to ensure the child and youth are not being harmed.

- "I think the one thing that isn't probably discussed or clearly taught is, we also have a culture of substance abuse and we have a culture of folks with domestic violence in the whole. We have a criminal culture and that has its own implications. And those just aren't really things that are clear cut."

- "What does it look like to explore culture, identity? How to talk through and work through biases. So strategies on that as well as the benefits of engagement and how to develop those working plans that comes from authentic engagement."

- "We've done lots of different trainings and have just continued to be more intentional in having training specific to serving children of color and then I would say the same thing for our children who identify in the LGBTQ community, because we also have foster parents who identify in that community as well."

- "I don't think that we all have to be 20, but I do think just understanding the culture of a 20-year-old, understanding where they're coming from. Again, I'm 51, and like I said, I know very few people that engage better than I do. So I don't think it's an age thing. I think it's just being aware of the cultural status of where they are. And so when we talk about developing training, we want to make sure that those people are aware of the culture, that they do understand how to validate a young person and how a young person feels and what a young person thinks, and how to guide them."

### *Communication Skills*

Another identified barrier was a lack of a structured approach to conversations with the children and youth. Participants (n=5) wanted more training on how to have hard conversations with children and youth. Child welfare professionals expressed concern with how talking to children and youth about whether a parent is compliant or not with their goals, changes in placement or permanency plans, or issues with child/youth compliance might impact their wellbeing if it is a negative situation. Participants want practice scenarios of how to engage in these difficult conversations as well as how to engage children and youth who may be resistant to partnering with the worker.

- "I wish that we had a training on talking to the children about the case and about court and about those ... about talking to a child about the times when their parents aren't doing what they need to on their case service plan, because those are very difficult topics to navigate because I always have a fear of, I don't want ... I don't want to feel like I'm talking negatively about the parent to the child, by informing them that, "Oh, well, Mom hasn't been doing what she's supposed to."

- "And it's also common for us, as workers or adults, to guess how kids are feeling and getting insight of what the child is feeling or what they know about the case. Just asking them, "Do you know what my job is? Do you know what I'm here for?" Or I think, sometimes, when we take over a

case for somebody else, we may assume that the child knows these things, but they may not. It's really common for children to think I'm a CPS worker. And I have to tell them, "I'm not a CPS worker. I'm a foster care worker," or just allowing them to ask questions about their case."

- "How do we truly remove the mindset of this being a visit or even the meaningful visit, to this being a genuine visit, this being a visit for me to let you know I'm here for you, I'm here to meet you where you're at, I'm not here to make you today, tell me how you plan to achieve all these goals that are on this case plan. But how do I start from here? Just letting you meet you where you're at and try to get you to this process of change."

### *Managing youth resistance*

As discussed in barriers, youth resistance to engagement is a concern for child welfare professionals. Participants (n=4) desired to have training specifically on strategies to engage children and youth who are resistant to engagement or compliance. Participants discussed the need to build a better understanding of the behavior resistant children and youth display in order to stop taking the behavior personally.

- "I think practice scenarios of how to engage a difficult child, or a child that doesn't want to, or that is hard to get to open up. Talking about different techniques, different strategies, different ways to get the child to open up, but just really practicing different ways so that when they are presented with the child that's similar in some way, that they know how to do it."

- "Strategies about what to do if someone's not engaged or they are just not in the mood to talk today."

- "When faced with barriers, whether that be a resistant child or youth or foster parent or just one that like won't engage at all or one that is escalated. I think overall what was just the most helpful was just different ways in which to engage with a client depending on where they are."

### *Trauma-Informed*

Another topic area for consideration is trauma informed. This includes the understanding of behaviors, triggers, and strategies to assist the child or youth remain in their window of tolerance. This includes providing a safe and secure place. The below quotes describe the importance of understanding how trauma impacts the child and youth's engagement with the worker as well as how trauma may manifest in behaviors including resisting partnering with the worker.

- "I would also want to have a training of how to interact with trauma, with kids who suffer from trauma, how to be able to recognize the signs of them becoming upset, how to get them to calm. Like picking up on their body language. Because a lot of times the kids give you body language before they even talk to you."

- "Different workshops on how to improve our engagement with teens or their mindsets, especially if they've been dealing with trauma or other things that they might be dealing with. How to, I guess, kind of get on their level."

- "The different elements that I think would be important to go over, motivating my staff, but also making sure that we go over how to handle vicarious trauma, secondary trauma, whatever you want to call it."

- "I think that number one, it's got to be trauma informed. That's a huge part of it. Because no matter what, all these kids are going through some form of trauma. Just even interacting with our agency is a form of that."

### Delivery modality

### *In person*

All participants (n=15) agreed that training for youth engagement should be done in-person. In-person training allows for more interaction, less distractions for participants, practice of skills, and more engaging.

"I don't think Zoom is bad, I just don't think you get people's full attention, people multitask when they're doing Zoom. So to me, in-person, but split up over time would be the best scenario."

"In person. I think we lose a whole human element and connection if we are not in person."

"I think, in engagement training, you have to be in-person. You cannot build relationships through doing things remote. I think that's where some of us are struggling right now to provide good services, including to families, because we do a lot of texting and emailing. I feel like it's hard to gauge or understand people through those types of communication. I feel like our field has really reverted to that. It's hard to have a hard conversation, or express things, if you're not in- person. So I feel like, in order to be an effective training, you would have to teach that in person."

### Virtual (live with trainer)

Compared to in-person training, the next best option would be a virtual training with a live trainer. Participants (n=4) recognized the limitations of virtual learning and how this could be moderated by having a live trainer. Participants would still be able to ask questions in real time and they would be able to collaborate and train with people from other agencies, organizations, stated, etc.

- "I think in person or over a video where you're looking at the person, just so you get some authentic experience or so. But ideally, in person."

- "I would love to do a training with my colleagues in different agencies, I would love to do a training with people from different LPAs and DCS workers and contracted providers altogether because we are one team. We should be. So I think that would be amazing. In the reality of the fact that COVID is still here, I think sure, let's do a virtually because that's how we do everything right now. So let's figure that out, but I would probably say let's do it so that we can do breakout rooms at least and have some interaction." (10)

- "I think there has to be an in-person element to it for people to practice with the tools and have practice conversations. I think it can be done remotely, though I would say that couldn't be asynchronous. The practice has to be, it might be able to be remote, but it has to be synchronous because there has to be exchange."

### Virtual (asynchronous)

While all participants recognized the importance of in-person learning, participants (n=3) discussed the option of hybrid learning. It was evident that practice of relationship building skills was important to conduct in-person, however, other concepts such as theory or building the foundation may be able to garner through adding materials available online.

- "Certainly, depending upon the learning style of the recipient of the training, that may be beneficial for them to absorb material and do some reflection."

- "Yeah, I would not mind having a list of things, Websites, or books, or webinars that, if I had questions about things or was like, "I really, I'm just curious about how this goes." That I could just log onto and do at night while I'm watching a movie, or the few and far between that I don't have anything to do, I still should be doing something that's just easy access."

- "Being the more kind of academic, theory, kind of social work, one-on-one brain development stuff, I can totally see that being asynchronous or remote. And even the introduction of the use of some tools."

### Delivery Method

In addition to training topics, participants identified components that make a good training. Participants (n=7) requested trainings have concrete and realistic examples of strategies and scenarios. While many of the topic areas get into theory, the importance of having practical knowledge and how to apply was expressed by many. Role plays were another component that

participants (n=4) found helpful in learning information. Participants described how practicing skills in a learning environment provided hands on experience.

One participant stated that consistency and repetition are important in a training delivery. Meaning that participants have multiple exposures to the same material to really help solidify knowledge and skill gains. Participants also expressed the desire to have tools and assessments to assist with gauging where a child/youth is at currently and how to track their progress. Some mentioned it may be beneficial to use the same assessments that social workers are utilizing. Another participant wanted a worker self-assessment to encourage self-reflection and understand their own strengths and weaknesses that may impact child and youth engagement.

### *Concrete / realistic examples*

Participants (n=7) reported wanting real life and concrete examples of how to engage with children and youth. Specifically, how to engage when the situation is not ideal. Participants described watching videos of a child welfare professional engaging and then discussing the scenario to learn what may work.

- "I did a training at a child abuse and neglect conference and one of the components was they had recorded a clinician engaging, it was like the youth and the family, and they showed the video and then after they would ask for feedback of what did she do wrong? What could she have done differently? What did she do well? And I think those are very helpful, seeing real workers working with real families and then being able to view those and then take a step back and discuss what was done, how to do that in your own work, what could have been done differently and just practice makes perfect."

- "So most useful to staff would be, I think concrete examples and understanding the... going back to that reason why, why it's so important, and the data behind how we can ensure that that's important."

- "I think that that would be the biggest thing, just making it as real world as it could be and not just having a perfect little conversation happen."

### Role Plays

Role plays were suggested by participants (n=4) as a good training activity. Participants described how role playing allowed them to practice skills and gain hands on experience.

- "I think I would include some role playing."

- "I do think it should be an in-person training, hands on, there should be active engagement, demonstrations, maybe even activities to show, like, give a scenario. How would you engage this use in whatever the activity your case may be? So everyone is involved, you're able to demonstrate and perform the skills that you are learning or trying to learn, the objectives for the training. You're able to actually perform them and demonstrate them."

- "Training has to be very skill based. It has to have practice opportunities. It has to have role playing. It has to incorporate practice tools that are not really complicated tools, like simple tools where people feel like, oh, I could do this. Oh, that would help me ask this question, where they can actually envision themselves using it."

## SUPERVISION AND COACHING

Participants were encouraged to describe what supervision and coaching is needed to promote youth engagement. There were four main concepts for supervision and coaching and promotion of youth engagement: case consultation, reinforcing training model, supervisor and worker alliance, and asking strategic questions. See Table 6 for a description of supervision and coaching.

Table 6. Supervision and coaching

| Theme | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative quote |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Case consultation | Meeting with the supervisor to review specific cases and receive feedback on how to proceed with the case, including engaging the youth | 11 | 73% | *"When I have struggled with how to approach a child, no matter the age frame, I have been able to go to her and talk some things through as far as some ideas as to what might be a good approach or not."* |
| Reinforce training model | Supervisors are focused on the model and reinforcing the model components during supervision and coaching sessions | 9 | 60% | *"It's a conversation that we have regularly in monthly supervision. It's a conversation that we have very regularly as an entire child welfare unit, and it's something that we also audit too when we're doing case reviews to ensure that those quality contacts are occurring."* |
| Supervisor and worker alliance | Supervisors and workers have a partnership built on respect, support, and focused on strengthening the workers ability to engage with children and youth | 7 | 47% | *"I make a decision or respond to a question, I feel that [the supervisor] is supportive of my boundaries when I make those decisions."* |

| Theme | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative quote |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ask strategic questions | Supervisors and coaches as questions that are designed to reflect the model being implemented | 4 | 27% | *"Design a training, that helps supervisors understand how to develop supervision questions, that tie very specifically to the model."* |

## Case consultation

The majority of participants (n=11) stated that engaging in case consultation between supervisors and workers was very beneficial. Participants described being able to problem solve tough cases, ensure engagement was occurring with each child/youth, check on status and necessary steps to permanency, and build new skills through this collaboration. Additionally, participants discussed meeting with supervisors at regular intervals (every other week or monthly) to review caseload.

- "When we have harder cases. Then that's a huge question, how's the family engaged? On our monthly supervision notes that supervisors do with their staff, the first question I ask is, how's the child and the family engaged into services with the worker, and the services that they're involved?"

- "When I have struggled with how to approach a child, no matter the age frame, I have been able to go to her and talk some things through as far as some ideas as to what might be a good approach or not."

- "We have a class session training, but I think if there was something that can be utilized with the actual cases, that staff could feel safe to discuss in a process where staff could feel open and that it's helpful to their daily work, not something that's punitive or something that... but something that would offer them support. That would be beneficial. So maybe if there was some type of coaching."

- "I meet with them at least every other week and when I do for supervision, I go through each of their cases with them case by case and take a really deep clinical look at, okay tell me where Susie is, how is she doing in school? How is she doing in the foster home? What needs does she have? Are we missing any services that we think she needs or requires to do the best she can to heal? Then I just follow up with them on whatever those things that we discussed were to make sure they're happening."

## Reinforce training model

Most participants (n=9) reported the importance of supervisors and coaches reinforcing the youth engagement model. This was in part to be sure that the worker was not missing any steps as they are learning them as well as demonstrating youth engagement as a priority. Reinforcement was described as consistency with expectations, focus on engagement, a clear and measurable model that can be audited or reviewed for fidelity, and planned times for review/discussion with supervisors.

- "It's a conversation that we have regularly in monthly supervision. It's a conversation that we have very regularly as an entire child welfare unit, and it's something that we also audit too when we're doing case reviews to ensure that those quality contacts are occurring."

- "There's sort of the basic training, but then there's the ongoing, like hip-to-hip coaching in individual cases, that ends up with really concrete skill-based learning, practice opportunities, demonstration conversations, coming together as a clinical team to sort of address one situation that might be really difficult because then your team members learn from one another."

- "Making sure they're putting in the time to build a relationship with the child so that they do feel safe and comfortable talking to them."

- "This is a model that you have to get on board or not or leave. It has to be some expectations that it's not okay to continue to not do things in a certain way."

- "What I've learned is that through consistency, if we're consistently saying the same thing, so a lot of the material we put out, a lot of things we talk about with our IOP tools that we provide."

## Supervisor and worker alliance

Half of participants (n=7) expressed the importance of having a strong supervisor and worker alliance. Participants stated supervisors should be supportive, knowledgeable, value's youth engagement, and is available when workers need them. This includes being non-judgmental if a worker is having difficulty engaging a youth and approaching the difficulty with a growth mindset.

- "I make a decision or respond to a question, I feel that [the supervisor] is supportive of my boundaries when I make those decisions."

- "[Supervisor] definitely understands and promotes that effectively engaging with those kids is paramount. That's the most important thing."

- "[The supervisor] trusts that we're going to get done what we need to get done. And I can go to her with issues, or frustrations, or questions, or anything like that, and she'll absolutely explain it and help me figure it out."

## Ask strategic questions

Participants (n=4) would like supervisors to have specific questions to ask workers that directly tie to the model being implemented. Participants also reported supervisors needed a tool with questions they should be asking to ensure the supervisor does not miss asking about any pieces of the model. One participant stated supervisors need to have training that includes approaches and tools to engage their staff in a diverse way. It was recommended that the training be considered ongoing with *"a refresher*

*training that occurs every, maybe six months or so to ensure that this is something that they're still fresh on, they still understand what needs to be done to engage to youth".*

- "Design a training, that helps supervisors understand how to develop supervision questions, that tie very specifically to the model. So that supervision becomes its own tool for reinforcing the model, whatever model that agency or organization is using."

- "On our monthly supervision notes that supervisors do with their staff, the first question I ask is, how's the child and the family engaged into services with the worker, and the services that they're involved?"

- "So it's a philosophy, a belief system. And then supervision is a huge part, that when we're talking to our staff and they're telling us what's going on, we want to make sure that we're always prompting them to, what does the family, what does the youth want from that"

## WORKFORCE COMPETENCIES AND CHARACTERISTICS

In February of 2022 Partners for our Children completed a systematic literature review of peer-reviewed journal articles that described the essential characteristics and competencies of youth engagement workers. Table 7 provides a breakdown of how often these characteristics and competencies were mentioned in the workforce interviews.

The ability to build trusting relationships, communication and listening skills and the ability to prepare and inform youth are the skills that were most frequently cited by social workers and their supervisors when they were asked what is needed to effectively engage youth.

Table 7. Workforce competencies and characteristics

| Competencies and characteristics | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative Quotes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Building trusting relationships | Staff build trusting, authentic relationships with youth as a first step to working together. This takes time & requires assessing youth's readiness to move forward. Build therapeutic alliance. | 14 | 93% | *"I feel like I've been saying it over and over again, but relationships and trust is probably the most important thing in engaging."*<br><br>*"When you have that good relationship with the children or the youth that you're working with, there is a problem or a concern that comes up, they are going to feel comfortable coming to you and telling you about that. So can be addressed as opposed to if you're not engaged with that child and then oh, mom hit me at the last visit. And we might not ever know that information if you don't have that engagement with those children."* |

| Competencies and characteristics | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative Quotes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Communication and listening skills | Staff have open, honest, and transparent communication with youth, and make active efforts to listen to and hear youth. Actively seek youth voice & perspective. Provide up to date information pertinent to youth. | 13 | 87% | *"Being able to have those open discussions with them and really taking their input into consideration, I think goes a long way towards making them feel comfortable"*<br><br>*"The only way to engage a youth… is through a conversation."* |
| Prepare and inform youth | Staff provide youth with information to support informed decision making and prepare youth to engage in planning. | 11 | 73% | *"I tend to lay it out for them. I don't get into much of the sugarcoating. I ask if they understand things. As we talk about the circumstances, I ask what they know. I ask if they want to have a conversation about it. And I explain why it may be helpful for them to know those circumstances. And then I talk a lot about the future and what they want that to look like."*<br>*"I think for them to be involved; they know what the case plan looks like. They know what permanency goals are currently set in their case. They know next steps and what to expect."* |

| Competencies and characteristics | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative Quotes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Advocate for youth | Staff act as an advocate for the youth, making their desires a reality, and connecting youth to resources in the community. | 8 | 53% | *"I've had a case where the child was really wanting to write a letter to the judge, the example I gave before. And, so, advocating for the child to be able to do that, giving the letter to the judge, so that the child's voice can be heard."* |
| Partnering with youth / shared decision-making | Staff actively seek the perspectives and desires of youth and make decisions as a team. Each party can make suggestions and decisions and the contribution of each is recognized and valued. Adults work in full partnership with young people on issues facing youth and/or on programs and policies affecting youth. | 8 | 53% | *"I think that's really important with youth engagement and child welfare so that the child understands that we're not just their worker who has the power, that this is a partnership in that their perspective is valued."* |
| Authenticity | Staff are open, honest, genuine, and are not afraid to talk realistically about difficult topics | 8 | 53% | *"They respond a lot better to that when you're open and honest with them."* |

| Competencies and characteristics | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative Quotes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Strength based approach | Staff use a strength-based vs. deficit-based approach, focusing on the unique strengths and abilities youth bring to the table which can aid in problem solving. Staff use positive language to describe youth. | 7 | 47% | *"I would say it looks like the child's insight being valued. It looks like the other people involved in the case supporting the child and, I guess, allowing them to play a role in their cases, and seeking out ways to expand them and to build on their strengths, and having their opinion be valued."* |
| Committed to youth engagement | Staff and organizations are committed to youth engagement and are motivated to implement youth engagement principles. Staff are bought in to the importance and purpose of youth involvement. | 7 | 47% | *"It's a philosophy... We believe in involvement with families and in the children. So it is ingrained in our trainings, it's ingrained in our hiring process."* |
| Cultural humility | Staff are able to engage with youth from a diverse set of backgrounds and understand how to continually reflect and take action to address biases. | 6 | 40% | *"Yes. So, for example, if you have a child who identifies as transgender, and you, as a worker, have no insight or training or experience working with transgender population, it's important for you, as a worker, to seek out information, to gain that cultural competency."* |

| Competencies and characteristics | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative Quotes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Trauma informed care | Staff understand the impact of trauma on adolescent brain development and are mindful of trauma when partnering with youth and discussing permanency options. | 6 | 40% | *"It's very common for children who have experienced trauma and children in foster care to be very developmentally delayed... it's important to take both of those things into consideration when discussing certain topics with case planning."* |
| Flexible | Staff are flexible and adaptive rather than following rigid rules or having set expectations for how things must go. Willing to improvise, get feedback from youth and shift their approach. Outside of the box thinking. | 6 | 40% | *"Being able to adapt your role and adapt the way that you address them would be really key [to authentic youth engagement]."* |
| Empathetic | Staff are able to see the situation from the standpoint of youth. | 4 | 27% | *"So, being able to show that empathy. Sometimes we got to remind ourselves how difficult it really is for them to go through this."* |

| Competencies and characteristics | Description | # of interviews (N=15) | % of total | Representative Quotes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Self-aware, reflective | Staff have personal awareness of their own biases, values and idiosyncrasies and can maintain clear boundaries between work and personal life. Able to reflect on positionality and how the partnership is going. | 4 | 27% | *"What does it look like to explore culture, identity? How to talk through and work through biases. So strategies on that as well as the benefits of engagement and how to develop those working plans that comes from authentic engagement."* |
| Adolescent development | Staff understand adolescent development and can validate and support people in this life stage. | 3 | 20% | *"So staff really need to understand like basic brain development. They need to understand what healthy risk taking is, because we know that for healthy brain development teenagers need to take risks."* |

# DISCUSSION

Consistent with the literature, workforce professionals felt that engaging youth in permanency planning improved their permanency and transition-related outcomes while enhancing both child and agency wellbeing by allowing youth to gain a sense of control in their own decision-making process (Salazar, Spiera, & Pfister, 2020; Walker, Seibel, & Jackson, 2017; Weisz et al., 2011). Reflecting findings by Havlicek and colleagues (2018), participants felt that training and coaching on how to establish relationships with youth, engage them in decision making, and empower them to use their voice was the most important intervention to promote youth engagement.

## SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

In the systematic review by Wollen and colleagues (2022), the selected literature mentioned the following competencies with the highest frequency:

1. Partnering with youth

2. Communication and listening skills

3. Building trusting relationships

4. Strength-based approach

5. Prepare and inform youth

6. Advocate for youth

In the interviews conducted with workforce professionals, they mentioned the following competencies with the highest frequency. Green highlights

indicate the competency was more salient in the interviews than it was in the literature, and red highlights indicate the competency was less salient in the interviews compared to the literature:

1. Building trusting relationships

2. Communication and listening skills

3. Prepare and inform youth

4. Advocate for youth

5. Partnering with youth

6. Strength-based approach

Partnering with youth was frequently cited as the most important practice for youth engagement workers to build, yet the interviews with workforce professionals indicated this was not a competency that was frequently being considered or applied in everyday practice. Just eight of the 15 interviews discussed the concept of partnering with youth and sharing power and decision-making authority. Similarly, engaging with youth in a strengths-based manner was less common in practice compared to its prominence in the literature, with seven of the 15 participants mentioning utilizing a strengths-based approach with youth in practice. This is not surprising given that the culture of most child welfare agencies does not value youth voice or partnership (Saunders & Mace, 2006).

Building trusting relationships, communication and listening skills, prepare and inform youth, and advocate for youth appeared to be competencies that child welfare professionals actively valued and often utilized in practice. While the most important identified worker competency was building trusting relationships, the top reported barrier to youth engagement was lack of time to build trusting relationships with youth due to oversized caseloads and worker turnover. Given this, hiring new workers in a timely manner and training them in youth engagement principles was the top recommendation to promote youth engagement in practice. It will be crucial for any training model to be able to be quickly adopted by new workers. Such a training

must include an active coaching and supervision component so that workers are adequately supported by their agency as they implement youth engagement principles in practice.

## INTERVIEWS WITH PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERTISE

Interviews were also conducted with people with recent lived expertise in the child welfare system (Wollen et al., 2022). People with lived expertise corroborated the findings of the workforce interviews, reporting that staff were most likely to utilize the following strategies to engage participants: 1. Prepare and Inform, 2. Communication & Listening Skills, 3. Advocate for Youth, and 4. Partner with Youth. People with lived expertise reported rarely, if ever, being engaged around cultural permanency, which was consistent with child welfare professional reports. The most common systemic barrier to authentic engagement that people with lived expertise identified was the culture of "box checking" in child welfare, in which child welfare professionals are focused solely on meeting the bare minimum legal and policy standards without taking the time to be present with youth. This reflects the findings from the workforce interviews – child welfare professionals consistently indicated that they did not have enough time in their day to build trusting relationships with youth. However, given that building trusting relationships was one of the most important recommendations from both the workforce and people with lived expertise, it is important to find ways to build capacity in workers' days so that they can accomplish this crucial aspect of youth engagement.

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# APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

<u>**For Child Welfare Workers**</u>

**Introduction:  Insert Script from UW**

**Add to Intro:**  I am going to ask you a number of questions about youth engagement and permanency.  Before I begin, I want to define that **youth engagement** is the meaningful involvement of youth (of all ages) in decision making and planning around their own cases.  When I ask about **permanency**, I am referring to reunification, adoption or guardianship.

**Demographics:**

Date of interview:
Interviewer:
Name of Agency:
Is Agency a public or private child welfare agency?
City/State where you work:
Job title:
How long have you been in this job:

1) Does the engagement of children and youth in their own permanency planning in your child welfare system vary based on the child's age?  Please explain, providing any detail on age that makes a difference on how a child/youth is engaged.
   *(reminder for interviewer - this question is focused on differences in engagement based on age)*


2) In your agency or system, how are children and youth engaged in the following activities? What does engagement look like for each?
   - Placement decisions
   - Permanency discussions related to reunification, adoption, and guardianship

- Relational permanency
- Cultural permanency
- Case planning
- Court hearings
- Decisions related to visitation
- Decisions related to sibling placements and ongoing connection
- Other

3) When children and youth are authentically engaged in their own child welfare case, what does that look like?
   - What are the benefits of authentic engagement?
   - What is the "best case scenario" for engagement in child welfare?

4) *What systemic challenges stand in the way of authentic youth engagement? (reminder for interviewer - probe as needed: staffing, training, worker turnover, lack of supervisor support, other competing priorities)*

5) How do you think these challenges could be alleviated and/or removed?

6) *I am now going to ask you a few questions about your comfort level in working with older youth (14 and older) on your caseload:*
   a) How comfortable are you in working with youth 14 and older on your caseload?
   b) How comfortable are you with talking to youth 14 and older about their birth family, the circumstances that lead to their placement, and permanency decisions?
   c) What do you enjoy about working with older youth?
   d) What do you find most challenging in working with older youth?

7) What do you think is needed to build relationships and authentically engage youth? *(reminder for interviewer - probe as needed:  specific skill-based training, more time, more leeway in how they manage visits etc.)*

8) Have you engaged children and youth in case plan development (yes/no)?
   a) If yes, how have you engaged children and youth in case plan development? (What worked, what didn't work well?)
   b) If no, why not?

9) Are there any skills or knowledge you wish you had that could help you authentically engage with children and youth?

10) Do you feel supported by your supervisor to effectively engage youth? Please explain.

11) Do you think youth who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community have needs related to engagement that are different from other youth? (if yes- how so?)

12) Do you think children/youth of color have needs related to engagement that are different from white youth? (if yes- how so?)

13) Have you received training on how to authentically engage children and youth?
    a) If yes, what was the training?
    b) If yes, did this training include specific information for engaging children/youth of color or are from LGBTQ+ community?
    c) What about the training did you find most helpful?

14) If you were to design a training to help child welfare staff learn how to authentically engage children and youth,
    a) What would you include? What would be most useful to staff?
    b) How would the training be delivered, for example remote, in-person, asynchronous? *(reminder for interviewer - if needed define remote as a facilitator live but on line, in-person as live in a classroom and asynchronous as no facilitator, working independently on assignments)*?
    c) Do you have any additional advice related to the development of this type of training?

15) Are you familiar with any youth engagement practices or service models? If so, what are the names and would you recommend them?

16) What have we missed? What else should I know about the involvement of children/youth in child welfare?

**For Child Welfare Supervisors**

**Introduction: Insert Script from UW**

**Add to Intro:** I am going to ask you a number of questions about youth engagement and permanency. Before I begin, I want to define that **youth engagement** is the meaningful involvement of youth (of all ages) in decision making and planning around their own cases. When I ask about **permanency**, I am referring to reunification, adoption or guardianship.

**Demographics:**

Date of interview:
Interviewer:
Name of Agency:
Is Agency a public or private child welfare agency?
City/State where you work:
Job title:
How long have you been in this job:

1) *Does the engagement of children and youth in their own permanency planning in your child welfare system vary based on the child's age? Please explain, providing any detail on age that makes a difference on how a child/youth is engaged. (reminder for interviewer - this question is focused on differences in engagement based on age)*

2) In your agency or system, how are children and youth engaged in the following activities? What does engagement look like for each?
   - Placement decisions
   - Permanency discussions related to reunification, adoption, and guardianship
   - Relational permanency
   - Cultural permanency
   - Case planning
   - Court hearings
   - Decisions related to visitation
   - Decisions related to sibling placements and ongoing connection
   - Other

3) *When children and youth are authentically engaged in their own child welfare case, what does that look like?*
   - What are the benefits of authentic engagement?
   - What is the "best case scenario" for engagement in child welfare?

4) *What systemic challenges stand in the way of authentic youth engagement? (reminder for interviewer – probe as needed: staffing, training, worker turnover, lack of supervisor support, other competing priorities)*

5) How do you think these challenges could be alleviated and/or removed?

6) *How do you support the staff you supervise in ensuring that they authentically engage the children and youth on their caseloads?*

7) *As a supervisor, what do you see as challenges direct service level staff are facing in authentically engaging children and youth on their caseloads?*

8) What do you think is needed for staff on your team to build relationships and authentically engage youth? *(reminder for interviewer – probe as needed: specific skill-based training, more time, more leeway in other areas, etc.)*

9) Do you feel like you have the knowledge and skills to train and/or coach your staff on how to authentically engage children and youth?

10) Do you feel like you have the time and opportunities to support your staff in authentic youth engagement?

11) Have you received training on how to authentically engage children and youth?
    - If yes, when and what was the training?
    - What about the training did you find most helpful?

12) *How do you support your staff to engage LGBTQ+ and children/youth of color?*

13) If you were to design a training/coaching that helped supervisors support their staff in authentically engaging children and youth,
    a) What would you want to include? What would be most useful to you?
    b) How would the training be delivered for example remote, in-person, asynchronous? *(reminder for interviewer: if needed define remote as a*

*facilitator live but on line, in-person as live in a classroom and asynchronous as no facilitator, working independently on assignments)*?

14) What recommendations do you have related to the development of a training to help supervisors coach their staff on how to authentically engage children and youth? What advice do you have for the designers of this training?

15) *Are you familiar with any youth engagement practices or service models?  If so, what are the names and would you recommend them?*

16) What have we missed? What else should I know about the involvement of children/youth in child welfare?

## For Child Welfare Administrators

**Introduction: Insert Script from UW**

**Add to Intro:** I am going to ask you a number of questions about youth engagement and permanency. Before I begin, I want to define that **youth engagement** is the meaningful involvement of youth (of all ages) in decision making and planning around their own cases. When I ask about **permanency**, I am referring to reunification, adoption or guardianship

**Demographics:**

Date of interview:
Interviewer:
Name of Agency:
Is your agency a public or private child welfare agency?
City/State where you work:
Job title:
How long have you been in this job:

1) *Does the engagement of children and youth in their own permanency planning in your child welfare system vary based on the child's age? Please explain, providing any detail on age that makes a difference on how a child/youth is engaged. (reminder for interviewer, this question is focused on differences in engagement based on age)*

2) *In your agency or system, how are children and youth engaged in the following activities? What does engagement look like for each?*
   - Placement decisions
   - Permanency discussions related to reunification, adoption, and guardianship
   - Relational permanency
   - Cultural permanency
   - Case planning
   - Court hearings
   - Decisions related to visitation
   - Decisions related to sibling placements and ongoing connection
   - Other

3) *Based on your opinion, when children and youth are authentically engaged in their own child welfare case, what does that look like?*
   - What are the benefits of authentic engagement?
   - What is the "best case scenario" for engagement in child welfare?

4) *What systemic challenges stand in the way of authentic youth engagement? (reminder for interviewer – probe as needed: staffing, training, worker turnover, other competing priorities)*

5) How do you think these challenges could be alleviated and/or removed?

6) *What are some of the implementation supports you think need to be put in place in order for your child welfare system to emphasize authentic youth engagement at all levels? (reminder for interviewer - probe if needed: policies, accountability measures, laws)*

7) *Do you support and encourage the staff you supervise to ensure children and youth are authentically engaged?*
   a. *If yes how?*
   b. *If no why not?*

8) *As an administrator, what do you see as challenges staff face in authentically engaging children and youth on their caseloads?*

9) What do you think is needed for workers to build relationships and authentically engage youth? (*interviewer reminder – probe as needed: specific skill-based training, more time, more leeway in how they manage visits etc*.)

10) Have you received training on how to authentically engage children and youth?
    a. If yes, when and what was the training?
    b. What about the training did you find most helpful?

11) If you were to design a training/coaching that helped supervisors support their staff in authentically engaging children and youth,
    a. What would you include? What would be most useful to staff?
    b. How would the training be delivered for example remote, in-person, asynchronous? (*reminder for interviewer: if needed define remote as a facilitator live but on line, in-person as live in a classroom and asynchronous as no facilitator, working independently on assignments*)?

12) Based on your experience, what recommendations do you have related to the development of a training to help supervisors coach their staff on how to authentically engage children and youth? What advice do you have for the designers of this training?

13) *Are there specific tools you think would help supervisors coach their staff on engaging youth in permanency efforts?*

14) *Are you familiar with any youth engagement practices or service models?  If so, what are the names and would you recommend them?*

15) What have we missed? What else should I know about the involvement of children/youth in child welfare?