Sometimes, Youth Just Want To Be Heard!

Partnering with Youth and Families Committee (PYFC) of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network

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National Child Traumatic Stress Network
Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.
“Youth want to hear from other youth—they especially want to hear another youth’s story; what they’ve been through, how they’ve overcome challenges, how mental health services have helped them, etc.” (July 2008).

Introduction
This booklet began with youth participants at the Face-to-Face Meeting of the Partnering with Youth and Families Committee (PYFC) of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) in July 2008. Youth were invited to be part of a two-day meeting to discuss how to involve and partner with youth and families in trauma settings. The agenda included a discussion about the history of family and youth involvement in the NCTSN and the PYFC, ways to develop peer-to-peer support groups at the NCTSN center level, the development of Community Advisory Boards, and ways to increase the involvement of youth in all of these activities. During youth-specific sessions, youth created artwork to reflect their experiences of being in services and offer messages of hope for other youth, caregivers, or professionals. This booklet represents the words and voices of the youth participants and youth who are affiliated with NCTSN sites. The first section is focused on different topics for adults and providers of trauma services, and the second section is focused on topics for youth including the artwork that youth created.

A Youth Introduction: “As a youth partner at La Rabida Children’s Hospital’s-Chicago Child Trauma Center, I have encountered many influential people throughout my journey, but the most influential people were the children and youth who I encountered through the face-to-face meetings. Most of the youth have been through some of the most horrific events a child can face but have the greatest outlook on life and feelings of hope. Throughout our struggles, we have faced many hard things but with the right person to talk to and a different view of ourselves, we were able to overcome the long hard road we had been living and be able to surround ourselves with the love and support of people whom we knew cared. The messages shared throughout this book really mean a lot to us, and we hope our words and pictures can help you too.” Rachel Wax, Chicago, IL
How do we reach youth and speak the “youth” language?

For the therapist:
- Adults think too hard, we all speak the same language
- Some adults “dumb” things down too much, and then they don’t get their message across to youth
- Don’t say “treatment provider/therapist/counselor” rather “someone to listen” or “someone who cares” or “someone who will be open no matter what”
- Don’t say “mental health disorder”, or “depression/anxiety” rather “if you’re feeling stressed or overwhelmed”
- Youth want a therapist that is their “style”
- Relate to youth as human beings instead of “patients”
- Talk to me and have a conversation with me.

Strategies for reaching youth:
- Use model of DARE – loud music, big screens – ways to look cool and get attention.
- Use attention grabbing music. Kids may not get therapy, but will go in their rooms and blast out their music about people with problems. Examples of songs that ‘speak’ to youth: “Family Business”-Kanye West; “Family Portrait”-Pink; “Keep Your Head Up”-TuPac; “Survivor”-Destiny’s Child; “Cleaning Out My Closet”-Eminem
- Use a combination of a youth and an adult presenter to get the message across
- Youth want to hear someone else’s story; use an assembly in school for a presenter (preferably young or considered a youth) to tell their story—hearing someone’s life story captures youth attention. Ask questions at the beginning like “How many people need a friend to talk to?” or “Has anyone been in a situation where they didn’t want to tell someone about it?” See how many raise their hands or nod. Ask again at the end-often more people will say yes then at beginning.
- Have people on a panel to tell their story.
- Have some kind of way for people in audience to connect. Have a box for people to put their names in the box if they want to ‘join the group’.
What do you think about peer-to-peer support?

- It is really important to a youth to be given resources about seeking services by another youth
- A youth support group is a good idea
- Youth support groups in school are an important way to reach other youth because they’re accessible to everyone
- Youth want to hear from other youth—they especially want to hear another youth’s story; what they’ve been through, how they’ve overcome adversity, how mental health services have helped them, etc.
- It is important to know we don't have to face our problems all alone—so good friends can be really important. But, if your friends aren't cool about you not using (substances) anymore that is a different thing—stay away from those people because they aren't your real friends.
- I feel peer-to-peer support is the best thing especially for older youth, having someone that has been in your shoes at or around your age that can say "Hey I know how you feel I been there" is almost a relief ya know.
- It’s easier to talk with people who have had problems. It helps bridge the gaps.
- Therapists could bring people together with their consent. Many kids would help others because being in therapy can feel so isolating, especially teens who often have to go to a waiting room filled with toys for little kids.
- There are many ways to have peer-to-peer including assemblies, panels, phone lines.
What is important about the relationship between you and your counselor?

- What's important about treatment provider and the youth is that the therapist should know his/her patient and not just look at this child as a "patient" but as someone that has been through something tragic whatever the situation. I’m not saying get emotionally attached but understand that [he or she is] a human and not a "patient" or a "victim".
- Trust can be a huge issue between treatment provider and youth, and it can take a while before the youth trusts a provider.
- Playing games with the provider is helpful in treatment.
- Youth appreciate a provider who does not judge.
- The age of the therapist is helpful—a youth may feel more comfortable with a younger therapist.
- A provider who is able to get on the youth’s level and make them feel comfortable.
- It is important to youth when they can get a sense of the therapist’s life too—it helps with building trust and healing.
- People need to have a choice of therapists. This information needs to be provided at the beginning of treatment, so the youth knows that if their first therapist is not a good fit, they can ask for someone else. It is necessary to feel a connection in some way with a therapist. Youth may want to find a therapist with ‘my style’.
- It is important for many youth to feel that a therapist has been through some of the same experiences because that makes it easier to trust a therapist with details. That helps build trust. Youth want therapists to truly care and not to look down on their clients. Youth also know whether a therapist is faking it. If a therapist isn’t into it that day, might as well call it off for the day, because we will know.
- Sometimes therapists have to set boundaries (for example, if telling a therapist that one is thinking about killing oneself, this information might have to be passed to someone else). In some situations, counselors have to refer kids to another therapist if they receive certain information. This situation can break trust. It may force a youth or child to self-censor what they say in order to stay with the same therapist they know and trust. Sometimes bending the rules may keep a youth engaged.
- Honesty is the most important thing, by far. You have to be honest with your counselor and your counselor has to be honest with you. You might hear things you don't really want to hear, but sometimes those are the most important things. If your counselor isn't honest with you, the counseling is a waste of time, because you know you can't really believe what they say.
What is important to know about offering services in school?

- It is important to educate school personnel about the importance of maintaining confidentiality if a youth is seeking mental health services within school.
- Youth have had problems with school personnel announcing where they are going in front of the entire class if they are about to visit the mental health professional in the school.
- Placement of the mental health provider’s office within the school is also important—if it is right next to the dean’s office, which is highly trafficked, a youth may not feel comfortable entering their office for fear that someone will see them.
- An assembly in the school is a good format to give info to youth. Need to think about school administration reactions. Schools may be reluctant to have an assembly, have kids react to triggers, etc. Need work ahead of time to educate the school and figure out ways to address issues.
- Need to have an adult at a presentation to help handle questions and collect information. May also need a mental health provider in case someone gets upset.
- Well I feel that services in schools are REALLY important especially in the Chicago Public Schools, kids are getting killed almost every month and then after that nothing it’s like "oh your 12 year old bff got killed, put a teddy bear down where it happened and move on" ya know I feel it’s a necessity in that CPS adults can barely deal with death let alone children.
On Aging Out of the System at 18:

- Once you turn 18, whether you are done receiving services or not, you are no longer eligible for services, and that is a shock of aging out of the system.

- The treatment provider, in some cases, is the only person that the youth trusts, and once they turn 18, that person is all of a sudden no longer part of their life.

- There should be transition therapy for youth aging out—maybe for youth between 18-25 to help them get on their feet.

- 18 is a hard time for a youth anyway, so losing a treatment provider can be very difficult at an already tumultuous time.

- At 18, when therapy is over, a youth could fall back to their “old ways” and lean on “old” support systems (gangs, drugs, alcohol, etc) which could be unhealthy.

- Treatment ends abruptly at 18 with no ability to get help and it seems random and not in line with the developmental needs of an 18 year old, especially if making a transition to college or independent living.

- Someone to be a mentor could be helpful if not necessarily therapy oriented.
What words of advice and hope do you have for families?

- Talk to your kid and don’t hover over them. Give them space. They will come to you when they are ready.

- Tell them that you love them a lot but don’t be like hovering over them and show that you love them and are there for them.

- Don’t give up on hope that they are gonna get better. Just believe and trust that they are gonna get better.

- Everything’s gonna be ok. There are people who have been through the same thing and they have been ok. Have faith that things will be ok.

- We don’t let it take over our life. You can get over it even if it is hard to.

- I would tell the parents that regardless of what has happened what is important is the now, and you made the right decision in getting your child help, it’s not only good for the child but it shows your son/daughter that mommy/daddy cares and what happened should not be ignored and this help will help you heal.

- Don't give up. It's easy to think you can't make it—but you gotta keep trying—and you can make it—just don't give up. If you give up, then it's all over.