

## Youth's Voice: WHY Welcome a Teen into Your Home

Dear MRPA Members,

If you're reading this, you're in some way connected to a foster youth: either you're a resource parent, kin caregiver, or a respite provider. Whatever your role or title might be, thank you for taking the time to support youth in foster care and for reading this new series from a youth's perspective! So please buckle in, grab a paper and pen (or your notes app on your phone) to take some suggestions from some Youth Advisory Board members throughout Maryland, who have been invited to contribute to a new section on this website entitled Youth Voice.

It has been brought to our attention, or you can say it's been in the air for a long time, and it's had a big effect on us when people say, "TEENS ARE TOO HARD (to have in my home)!" So we're here to help change your mind, answer a few questions, and maybe loosen up the tension about this whole "teen" situation, and we ask that you read this with an open mind.

Have you ever been asked to take a teenager into your home? We would like to think your first thought wasn't NO WAY! But what's the main fear with taking teens into your home? Oh wait, we know the stereotypes that surround us teens: We run away, we talk back, we're full of anger, and we're hard to deal with. Sounds like you might be worried because you can't control us! But that's the thing: teens aren't meant to be controlled. Kids in general aren't meant to be controlled, so don't think of us as the analogy of a dog that you put on a leash.

Let us take a few more guesses: you can't take a teen because your neighbor's sister, or friend's cousin had a bad experience with a teen once, so automatically you think you're going to have a bad experience too? What about this one: Teens come with a lot of past trauma and pain?! We could list hundreds of reasons why you might not want to take a teen into your home, and sometimes that's okay, but what's not okay is seeing a youth being rejected or not chosen because of your own personal preferences or implicit biases. *Remember that our past has absolutely nothing to do with you.*

All youth need a safe home environment and adults who have their best interests in mind and at heart. And if you're "that" person, then we should be able to work through this and not overlook it, because yes, some of these concerns are real and valid. But why close things off before you give us a chance? Next, let's answer a few questions and share some hope.

**I think taking a younger child is much better and easier:** Honestly, many families hope for younger children, assuming they'll be easier to connect with or shape, but as we mentioned above, teens don't need to be controlled, fixed, or shaped. *Teens need stability, respect, and someone who's willing to show up for them.* Also, you're making a great impact on their life by meeting them during moments where your presence can directly influence so many things in their future, in the most positive ways. Being consistent and understanding is the most valuable asset you have as a resource parent.

**What would I be to them though? I love the idea of a kid who needs my attention all the time:** You're providing a safe home, moral support, and honestly, you're doing a lot when you ask about their day and show up to their after-school events, or host a birthday or graduation party for them. Teens also bring a level of independence that younger kids don't have. They can communicate their needs, hold mature conversations, share interests, and participate in everyday chores and responsibilities. *You're not starting from scratch; you're joining them in their story.* That can lead to more mutual growth than you'd ever expect. By choosing them, you're sending a clear message: you matter, exactly as you are right now. That acceptance alone can be life-changing for a teenager who's experienced many losses.

**I don't have time for an attitude or arguing with a teen:** Our point with this is that you're the adult, so remember, "Every behavior is a form of communication." So instead of being grumpy, annoyed, or yelling, try responding to see why we're acting that way and what the true meaning behind the behavior is. Remember, youth in care are teens who have been through instability, loss, lots of past hurts, and to be honest, some of us don't have the right coping skills to deal with all that yet. Teens often look to their peers and supportive adults to learn a better way to handle things the next time. With patience and consistency, and maybe even some humor to break up the tension in the room, those hard brick walls can come down. You sticking around to see the results from what you've poured into a teen can be some of the most memorable times in your adult life. Remember, you were a teen once, too, and who were the trusted adults you turned to for support?!

In conclusion, welcoming a teen into your home is ultimately YOUR decision and one that should be made after taking all factors into consideration. But don't let your neighbor's sister's cousin's bad experience or society's stereotypes be the reason you don't give a teen a chance. Remind yourself just how important those teen years were for you and work to be the supportive adult you needed back then. Talk to your resource home worker

and ask if there's a teen who could be welcomed into your home so you can make a difference in each other's lives.

STAY TUNED for next month's blog topic: HOW To Welcome a Teen Into Your Home.