

FAIR FUTURES PROGRAM MANUAL

SECTION 12

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SECTION 12. EFFECTIVE YOUTH ENGAGEMENT & THE FIRST 90 DAYS OF COACHING



Following enrollment, the next 90 days begins a period of relationship building between the Coach and the young person. If Coaches cannot build relationships with youth, they cannot help them make progress with their goals! The Coach will also start the process of building relationships with the key adults in the young person's life – his/her Case Planner, the parent(s)/family, and school/program staff. During this period, the Coach should also visit the young person's school/program and start to collect key data.

TIP! *This time period does not have to be exactly 90 days – it is just a general guideline!*
Some young people may form an instant relationship with their Coach, and others may be struggling with life/other issues and take much longer to build trust.

See [Appendix C3 First 90 Days of Coaching](#) for a summary of the first 90 days of coaching.

A. EFFECTIVE YOUTH ENGAGEMENT & RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Young people in the child welfare system are often more accustomed to transition than stability, and they lack a consistent, positive support system. Older youth who are still involved in the foster care system are also more likely to have lived in multiple homes and experienced a higher level of caseworker turnover. As a result, it is not uncommon for these young people to feel uncomfortable with new relationships; some feel that the system has let them down and that the adults who they have been mandated to interact with do not truly care about them and/or will not be there for them in the long term.

Therefore, Coaches need to be patient, compassionate, consistent, and trauma-informed. They should engage the young person in a strength-based, positive youth development approach that focuses on **what youth are able to achieve, not past behaviors**.

Sometimes, trust is established once the young person sees that the Coach is helping them in a way that no one ever has before. Thus, the Coach should be proactively engaging with the adults in that young person's life, asking questions, expressing interest, and reassuring that young person that they are there for them.

IMPORTANT ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES INCLUDE:

Coaches make communication comfortable and meet youth where they prefer. Coaches travel to meet young people wherever they feel most comfortable — in the community, their home, a pizza joint, etc. This facilitates a more casual conversation and allows the young person to begin the process of building trust.

TIP! The best conversations tend to happen over food!

Coaches should also use whatever form of communication that young person is most comfortable with, including texting and various forms of social media.

TIP! Texts/messages should be casual and engaging, not transactional.

Meet them where they are. Coaches get to know the youth's interests, listen carefully, and are always strength-based. Don't ask the young person about their academic performance or career goals on their first conversation, unless they bring this up. Get to know who they are as an individual, what they like to do in their free time, etc. If they are hesitant to open up, open up to them and share your own interests.

TIP! If you are struggling to engage them in conversation, share something about yourself - relationships are a two-way road. Open up to them as you hope they would open up to you, and try to find a common bond. If you don't have one – create one! Learn more about whatever it is that interests them (a particular game, sport, activity, TV show, etc.).

Coaches are consistent and don't give up! Many young people in foster care have suffered from inconsistent and/or disrupted adult supports, which can make it challenging to form trusting, long-term relationships. Coaches should reach out at least once a week to young people – whether they are responding or not. They should also try new approaches – if reaching out by phone or text does not elicit a response, then try social media. If that does not work, find out their schedule and run into them – engage them in conversation, or ask if you can bring them to lunch.

Coaches show up consistently, even if the youth doesn't! For youth who do not engage after multiple attempts, Coaches should continue to reach out and visit them. Some youth take time to trust that the adult is truly interested in their well-being, and they will seek assistance once they know the intentions are coming from a genuine, caring place.

TIP! Coaches should use “out of the box” approaches to engaging that young person – send them a GIF, a TikTok video, send along a credible messenger, bring them on a trip, etc. New experiences can serve as conversation-starters and can help facilitate relationship-building (keep reading).

Coaches should always be their authentic self. If we want young people to open up to us and allow us to assist them, we have to be genuine and open with them, too! What we hear most from young people is that they appreciate when we are “real” and do not put up our walls.

Validate their feelings. An important step in engaging a young person – or any person – is to validate their feelings, regardless of whether or not you agree with them. This includes:

- Finding the kernel of truth in another person's perspective or situation, verifying the facts of a situation;
- Acknowledging that a person's emotions, thoughts and behaviors have causes and are therefore understandable;
- Not providing solutions or problem solving;
- Not necessarily agreeing with the other person or validating what is actually invalid.

THE FIRST MEETING BETWEEN THE COACH AND THE YOUNG PERSON:

As discussed above, the first meeting should take place wherever the young person feels comfortable – in their home, school, agency, or community. Typically, a first meeting over food is a good way to start building the relationship.

Meet the young person on their terms, letting them drive the direction of the conversation, and expressing genuine interest about who they are. Be open and engaging, and mindful of your body language to not appear closed off. Share things about yourself as well.

Learn about their interests - the first meeting is NOT meant to focus on goal-setting (unless they are ready).

Sometimes, if a Coach inquires about the young person's academics or career goals, the young people could disengage at that point, as they may not fully believe in their potential and do not want to disappoint. It is easier to disengage and push away than it is to fail to meet expectations.

- **The initial conversations should include casual discussions around what the young person's interests are, what they enjoy and do not enjoy, and where they see themselves.** This is both fact-gathering – information that will be helpful with goal-setting – as well as a useful process for the young person to start doing some self-reflection. It is also helpful for the Coach to understand the extent/depth (or lack thereof) of that young person's vision for themselves and understanding of their own skills, abilities, and interests.
- **It is not uncommon for a young person to have been so consumed by trauma and survival (the day-to-day), that he/she has little-to-no vision for the future, or even what opportunities could be plausible for them.** They may also have not had much exposure to potential career pathways or seen what is possible. Some young people may even need to start from a much more basic place – forming their identity and interests. The Coach can help them explore and identify their interests (see [Fair Futures Program Manual Section 15](#)).

Should the young person start talking about their academic, career, or personal goals, **the Coach should be ready to start the goal-setting process and move at their pace!**

If there is some hesitancy on the part of the young person during the first meeting, that is completely normal. This is because many young people with foster care histories will be hesitant to commit to any sort of long-term engagement with a new adult in their life. It is the responsibility of the Coach and the program to change that mindset, and help the young person know that the Fair Futures program will stick with them through the ups and downs.

During the 90 day period, Coaches should build-in and prioritize their time to participate in relationship-building activities with young people, and focus on creating a positive, healing, and/or inspiring environment. Activities could include a walk in the park, playing sports, having lunch, listening to music, or any sort of activity that the young person is interested in. New experiences can also serve as conversation-starters and can help facilitate relationship-building.

Examples of free activities in Buffalo include:

- Visit [Canalside](#), a 21-acre park that offers free programs such as outdoor yoga or concerts as well as a great place to walk or lounge Adirondack chairs by the Erie Canal.
- Check out the [murals](#) transforming Downtown Buffalo. The mural styles range from scenic, like “Wildflowers for Buffalo,” to geometric and modern, like “Optichromie” and “Noodle in the Northern Lights”, while others are iconic, such as “Greetings from Buffalo.” More murals are being painted each year, so there’s always something new to see!

WHEN THERE ISN'T A CONNECTION



Sometimes coaching is about the chemistry (or lack thereof) between the Coach and the young person.

After the 90-day period, the Supervisor should have a conversation with the Coach and the young person, separately, about how it's going.

Some signs of potential lack of a connection between a young person and a Coach are if the young person is difficult to reach, non-responsive, not showing up, or not following through.

During the meeting with the young person, the Supervisor should let them know that if they want, they can request another Coach. The Supervisor should reiterate that the program is there for them no matter what, and that young person knows what is best for them, including if they want to switch Coaches. **This is critical, as many young people have gone from home to home with no input; empowering the young person to make this decision is important.** However, it should be done in a very delicate manner – it may be the case that the young person likes his/her Coach but is still warming up to them. The Supervisor should not make the young person feel like the Coach no longer wants to coach them.

If the young person wants to try out another Coach, the Supervisor should try to re-assign a Coach, if possible, based on the young person's interests and personality. The Supervisor can change the Coach assignment in the Online Platform, and the new Coach should ideally reach out within 1-2 days (and repeat the above steps).

B. COACH'S ROLE IN INTERACTING WITH CASE PLANNERS

Within first week after the initial enrollment (the first face-to-face session), the Coach should be in touch with the Case Planner at the foster care agency. Building a positive rapport with the Case Planner is important as there needs to be open lines of communication. It's important that the two work together as a team.

In the first interaction with the Case Planner, the Coach should:

- ☐ **Establish clarity on the goals of the program.**
For those Case Planners that may be new to the agency or not have a strong background in Fair Futures, it may be helpful for the Coach to briefly touch on the goals of Fair Futures and how their role is to work with the young person on their academic goals, career development goals, and the transition to independent living.
- ☐ **Discuss any helpful background information**, including that young person's current home situation, permanency goal, and any school-related information they have.
- ☐ Ask for copies of the young person's documentation, including copies of their birth certificate, social security card, state ID/license, working papers, etc.
- ☐ Let the Case Planner know that the Coach looks forward to working with him/her that the Coach can provide them with a monthly update and progress notes. This is helpful for the Case Planner's records and Family Court process.

TIP! A monthly contact report can be automatically generated from the Online Platform –it will include all progress notes and contact dates.

It is important to note that if the young person's case file is requested, it may contain incomplete information, and in some cases, statements of opinion as opposed to fact. To this end, the case file is simply additional context to be considered and to further inform the Coach's trauma-sensitivity.

After the first interaction, Coaches and Case Planners should work together not only when there is a crisis but should collaborate to celebrate the young person as well.

The Coach should also attend the Family Team Conferences and build a rapport with any other adults in the young person's life – including his/her therapist, or health care coordinator. If there is regular communication between the Coach and the various adults in that young person's life, then these adults can work together as a team, surrounding the young person with a network of support. It can also help prevent crises from happening; if a Case Planner or other staff has important information related to that young person's safety, mental health, physical health, or well-being that they can share with the Coach, the Coach can use that information to help address the situation and provide social-emotional support to the young person.

C. COACH'S ROLE IN INTERACTING WITH PARENTS

Within the first month of enrollment, the Coach should reach out to the young person's parent(s)/foster parent(s) and have an in-person meeting. Ideally, the young person is present to create a circle of support.

TIP! In instances where the young person does not have a positive relationship with the parent(s)/foster parent(s), the Coach can build relationships with them individually.

The first meeting can include an explanation of the program and what supports the Coach provides – this is another reason why it's important to have program language prepared (see [Fair Futures Program Manual Section 9](#)). Often, the parent(s)/foster parent(s) are very happy to hear that someone is helping the young person with his/her academic progress and career path.

After the initial engagement, the Coach should follow up with the parent(s)/foster parent(s) as needed. If there is no information to gain, the Coach can inform them of the young person's progress, share information, and celebrate the young person, whenever possible.

D. COACH'S ROLE IN ENGAGING WITH THE YOUNG PERSON'S SCHOOL/PROGRAM

Within the first month of enrollment, the Coach should make a visit with the young person to their high school, GED program, or any other program he/she is enrolled in. If the young person is already enrolled in college, the Coach should visit the college with that young person (if possible).

The purpose of the visit is to:

- Show support; show the young person that the Coach cares about them and is there for them on their journey
- Ensure that they are in a "best fit" high school environment and making progress towards graduation (see [Fair Futures Program Manual Section 18](#))
- Ensure that they are accessing available supports
- Form a relationship with any key staff that the young person interacts with at the school (e.g., a guidance counselor, school therapist, etc.), so that the school staff know to reach out to the Coach if any challenges, issues, or opportunities arise as it relates to that young person.

On the first visit, the Coach should obtain, if possible/available:

- ☐ Any permissions to access the student's data (a FERPA agreement)
- ☐ A copy of the current or most recent transcript
- ☐ Attendance records
- ☐ Any disciplinary or other records
- ☐ The student's IEP or 504 Plan, if they have one

See [Appendix C5 First School Visit](#) and [Fair Futures Program Manual Section 18](#)) for more detailed information on how to conduct the visit, key questions the Coach can ask, what to look out for.

If the young person is no longer enrolled in an academic setting, the Coach should obtain that young person's most recent high school transcript and any records. This data provides important information once the young person is ready to re-engage in an academic setting. (See [Fair Futures Program Manual Section 18](#))