

Pitfalls to Avoid

Working with Consumers

We work with parents and youth who can be difficult and unreasonable. Sometimes even the professionals involved in their cases can be demanding and challenging. The following are some ideas to help you avoid confrontations and frustrations when working with these important consumers of your services.

1. Do not comment negatively about a child's parents, even when the child is critical and makes negative statements, no matter how much they are true or how much you agree. Often, the child is angry or frustrated in the moment and will let their parents know what you think of them later, when they are not frustrated or angry anymore. They will also use your remarks to manipulate or damage your relationship with their parents.

2. Be careful that you avoid creating a false hope for children or youth who have families about them staying with you. If they have a family and you offer to have the child stay with you after treatment, the youth can use this information to antagonize their parents about how the youth would rather stay in foster care than go home. When you do respite care, it is especially important that you avoid this as it can worsen the child's behavior at home and further damage the child's relationship with their parents.

3. By contract with DCFS, we have to pay for one 15 minute call weekly for our youth to parents, care givers or significant relatives. We also expect that minimum for all Village youth and children. It is better for you to allow unlimited calls to these individuals when the youth have their privileges, especially if you have a flat-rate calling plan on your phone or unlimited cell phone minutes after a certain time in the evening. If the youth would like to make calls and you don't have a low-cost or free option, then you can use the youth money to purchase a phone card. Minutes on these cards cost about 5 cents each and are a great value. Don't forget to speak with the parents before and after the call to help minimize manipulation and keep the parents "in the loop."

4. The youth that are placed with us do not need to be "perfect" before they return home or go to a less restrictive placement. The two philosophies that apply are "least restrictive alternative" and "medical necessity". We can turn normal teenage behavior into issues to be addressed in treatment when they are a part of childhood. Be ready to support discharging a youth from your home even though there are still things you feel you can address. Otherwise, case managers can do it anyway, and be frustrated and angry with you as the provider and Youth Village, as the agency. Remember that we support the case managers and give our best advice but they need the freedom to make decisions for their children.

5. Because we often work with difficult youth and parents, being late to a meeting can make it hard to focus on family or youth issues. Instead, the parents, who often are critical anyway, can point to your faults or failures. Being late often happens, especially in our work with difficult youth, but call ahead and let the case manager know you are going to be late and when they can expect you.

6. Money is a sensitive issue with children in care for DCFS, JJS and DBH. Challenging case managers and difficult parents will often focus on money as the only reason foster parents do this work. Unfortunately, we can reinforce this perception when we hold children and youth financially accountable for stealing or damaging things in our homes by charging their accounts. We need to make sure we communicate clearly to the consultant, case manager, parents, and youth before we take money from the youth's account. The allowance sheets note that consultants must sign off on these deductions and only after case worker approval. **It is never appropriate to ask the child's natural parents or other care givers for money because of something the youth stole or damaged in your home.** Talk with your consultant if you have a significant loss and they will often have ideas for what you can do.

7. Attend and be an active participant in Child and Family Team meetings with DCFS and DBH 30 day review meetings. Meetings with everyone together help minimize manipulation and keep everyone focused on treatment.