



WORDS MATTER!

“The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.” – Mark Twain

Words have power. They can build us up and help us feel valuable, loved and connected. Or they can tear us down and help us feel stigmatized, worthless and/or disconnected.

I want you to take a minute and really think about the term “foster child,” “foster kid” and “foster youth.” What images, feelings and words come to mind? What kinds of stories have you heard or read about “foster kids?” What are the stereotypes that you think most people have about “foster children?” How do you think it would feel to live inside a system

that called you a “foster child” most of your life? What if you lived inside that system and you heard yourself being called a “foster kid” hundreds of times? How do you think that would feel? What attitudes and beliefs would you have about yourself?

Agencies, advocates, social workers, therapists, teachers and other helpers are all responsible for the negative and/or stigmatizing language that they use when talking about children in the foster care system. Our culture has been using terms like “foster child” or “foster kid” for almost 100 years. Given what

we have learned about child development, self-esteem and identity formation, it is time that we eliminate these stigmatizing phrases from our vocabulary and allow children to develop their self-concepts free from our limited or negative influence or biases.

Foster care is something that happens to children and youth. It should not be something that defines who they are as they are actively forming their beliefs and attitudes about themselves. Children are developing their self-concept throughout childhood and are more intensely focused on identity formation

in adolescence. Children form attitudes and beliefs about themselves based on what the adults around them are saying and writing about them. When social workers, therapists, teachers and other adults refer to them as a “foster child” or “foster kid” they are inadvertently reinforcing a stereotypical view of the child. When agencies, the media and other influencers speak about “foster children” and “foster youth” they are also reinforcing a stigmatizing label on children and youth in the foster care system. Foster care is something that happens to a child or youth due to circumstances outside of their control. We must ensure that we see the child first, not their foster care status. They are children in a foster care system.

Every child and youth in care has a right to be treated with dignity and respect, which includes eliminating prejudicial language. Is it respectful to say “foster child,” “RAD kid,” “abused child,” “orphan,” “damaged,” “disturbed” or any of the other terms we have all been hearing and using for decades? This is important because children are impressionable and are taking all of these phrases, words and images into their personal constructs of themselves. It is careless of professionals and “helpers” to label and stigmatize children who have entered foster care due to neglect, abuse and/or trauma. Children and youth who enter the foster care system are in crisis, have suffered traumatic losses, and have little to no power over the decisions the court is making on their behalf. They lose even more when we, the professionals and broader culture, help to define who they are by repeatedly using stigmatizing and pejorative words and labels.

A child’s story belongs to them. Their perspectives, beliefs and attitudes will shape who they are and the choices they make in the future. As someone who has worked with hundreds of children and youth in the foster care system, I have learned that my words have power and I choose them very selectively and intentionally. Words can empower a child to take back their story and tell it in

a way that feels authentic to them. Children and youth in care get accustomed to telling the details of their private story to each new social worker, therapist, foster parent and professional. Being empowered to “take back” their story, hold the details and events as uniquely their own and make sense and meaning out of their experience is a monumental task.

Dr. Jonathan Adler states, “Life is incredibly complex, there are lots of things going on in our environment and in our lives at all times, and in order to hold onto our experience, we need to make meaning out of it. The way we do that is by structuring our lives into stories.” Each and every time professionals, advocates, caregivers and other helpers label a child in foster care as a “foster child,” we are inserting a negative label and/or narrative into a child’s story of themselves.

Three things we can all do to stop the labeling and stigmatizing of children/youth in foster care:

1. Use “child first” language always. There is no such thing as a “foster child.” Stop using the phrase today and anytime you hear it or see it, please correct the language. They are children or youth in a foster care system. Adults and agencies should be evolving and changing to meet the needs of the children they are serving.
2. Treat every child/youth in foster care with dignity and respect. Their story (including the facts, events and details of how they came into the foster care system) is not information to be shared with others. Their story belongs to them.
3. Give children/youth choices about the words and phrases they want to use when talking about their life before, during and after foster care. Help them explore choices and options that feel right to them. Remember they are currently in a culture that has been using pejorative and stigma-

tizing language for decades. They are saturated on social media with terms, phrases and images that are negative.

As I look out into our culture, across the various “child serving” agencies and social media platforms, I am frustrated by the lack of awareness and sensitivity to children and youth in foster care. We have an obligation to those we serve to stop this legacy of labeling and stigmatizing children and youth.

The heart of a child is a scroll,
A page that is lovely and white;
And to it as fleeting years roll,
Come hands with a story to write.
Be ever so careful, O hand;
Write thou with a sanctified pen;
Thy story shall live in the land
For years, in the doings of men.
It shall echo in circles of light,
Or lead to the death of a soul.
Give here but a message right,
For the heart of a child is a scroll.
— Author Unknown ❁

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