



2025 Older Youth Retreat Focus Group Results

Date: September 2025

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Prepared for: Independent Living Project of the PACWRC

Youth who attended the 2025 Older Youth Retreat were invited to participate in a focus group to share their perspectives on normalcy. The questions explored what normalcy looks like, how it impacts mental health, the role of family and friends in helping youth feel normal, how Independent Living (IL) workers contribute to that sense of normalcy, the coping strategies youth use, and how their understanding of normalcy has changed over time (see Appendix A for focus group questions). These focus groups were conducted in person during the retreat, which took place in August 2025.

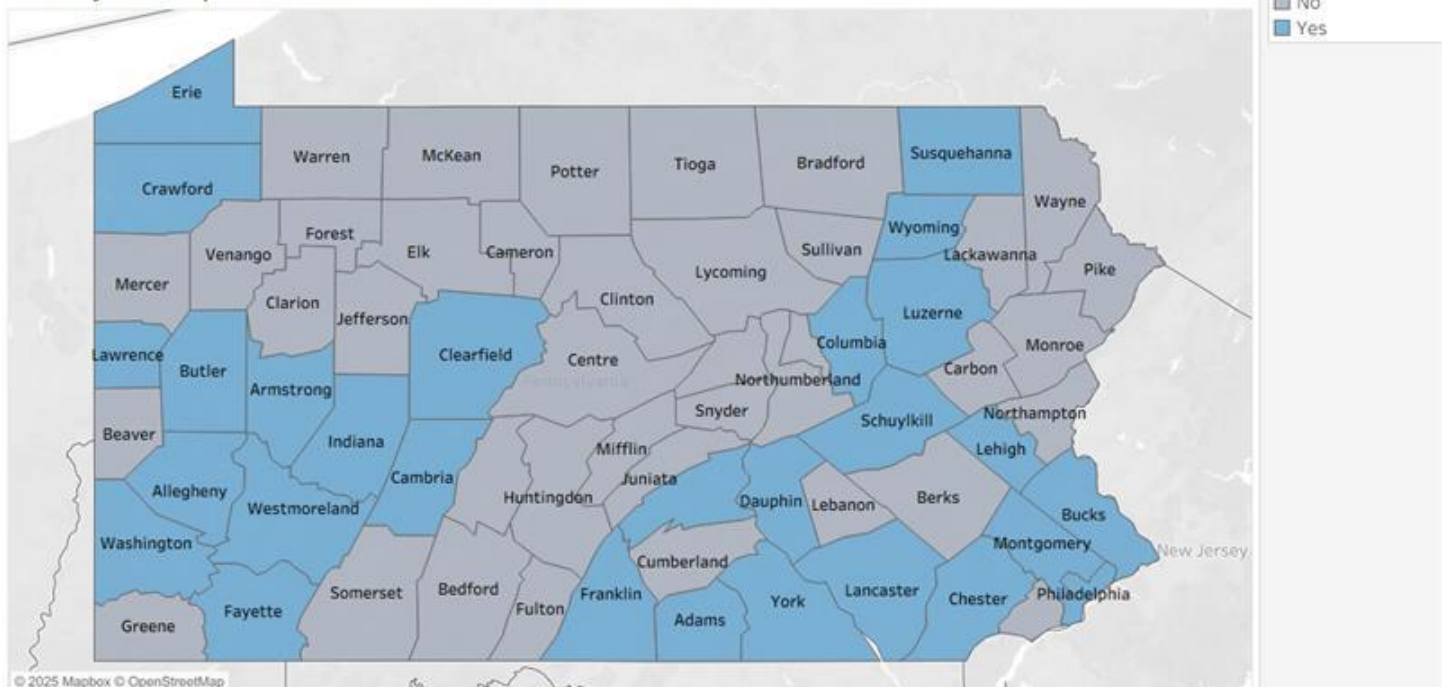
Upon registration, all youth were randomly assigned to one of eight color-coded groups and remained in these groups for the focus group sessions. Table 1 provides details about the composition of each group, which includes youth of varying ages and from different counties. Figure 1 shows the location of counties represented by youth at the retreat. Notes from each focus group were coded and analyzed to identify key themes that emerged from the discussions.

Table 1. Focus Group Details

<i>Number of Focus Groups</i>	8		
<i>Total Number of Retreat Attendees</i>	89		
<i>Number of Participants per Focus Group</i>	10-13		
<i>Ages of Participants</i>			
Under 18	43 (48%)		
18 and older	46 (52%)		
<i>Number of Counties Represented</i>	28		
<i>Counties Represented</i>	Adams Allegheny Armstrong Bucks Butler Cambria Chester Clearfield Columbia Crawford	Dauphin Erie Fayette Franklin Indiana Lancaster Lawrence Lehigh Luzerne	Montgomery Perry Philadelphia Schuylkill Susquehanna Washington Westmoreland Wyoming York

Figure 1. PA counties represented by youth at the 2025 older youth retreat.

County Participation for 2025 Older Youth Retreat



Considerations for Interpreting the Results

Each focus group was conducted by a unique facilitator and notetaker who were employees of the PA Child Welfare Resource Center from the following departments: Statewide Quality Improvement, Curriculum and Instruction, Organizational Effectiveness, Research and Evaluation, Administration, and Technology. Facilitators used a semi-structured format when conducting the focus groups. The results are based on notes gathered from the focus group conversations, not full transcripts. Some notetakers provided more detailed notes than others. Therefore, it was not always clear whether a response or note was mentioned by one individual or multiple participants. Additionally, the age of the youth providing a particular response was often not clear.

The results may not represent all older youth served by the Independent Living (IL) Program in Pennsylvania due to the small sample size and the fact that focus groups were not conducted until saturation was reached (i.e., no new themes emerged). However, the information gathered from the focus groups provides valuable insight into the youths' experiences related to education.

Results

Overview of Themes

Table 2 presents an overview of the themes that emerged from the focus group data, organized according to the questions asked. One additional theme was identified based on discussion that extended beyond the original question. The level of detail in the notes varied: some questions generated rich, specific responses that allowed for stronger themes to be developed, while others produced broader, less detailed notes, resulting in looser themes. Supporting details for all themes are provided following Table 2.

Table 2. Themes				
Question Topic	Themes			
What Normalcy Looks Like	• Activities and hobbies • Friends and family	• Independence • Self-expression and authenticity	• Stability • How one was raised	• Self-care • Fairness and equity • Normal is subjective
How Normalcy Impacts Mental and Emotional Health	• Impacts on mental health • Belonging and social connections	• Equality and fairness • Stability and safety	• Coping strategies • Self-worth	• Cultural adaptation
How Family and Friends Support Normalcy	• Emotional support and safety • Belonging and trust	• Non-judgmental and accepting	• Autonomy and age-appropriate rules	• Practical and material support
How IL Worker Supports Normalcy	• Opportunities and resources • Emotional support and stability	• Respect, listen, and understand	• Prepare for adulthood	• Recognize positive behavior
How to Cope When Not Allowed to Participate in Activities	• Engage in alternative activities • Self-reflection and emotional regulation	• Self-reliance • Acceptance	• Emotional suppression and isolation	• Advocacy and communication
How Normalcy Has Changed Over Time	• Past trauma as non-normal	• Foster care and connection	• Breaking from the past	• Growing up fast
Additional Theme	• Parentification			

During the focus groups, youth shared their perspectives on what normalcy meant to them, how it impacted their well-being, and the ways others did, and did not, provide support throughout their lives. Many reflected on how people in their lives, including friends, family, and Independent Living (IL) workers, helped them navigate what they came to recognize as atypical upbringings. Several youth also expressed that the concept of “normal” is subjective, and that they had to develop their own understanding of normalcy based on their past experiences.

Across all focus groups, a common theme was the importance of **belonging and social connection** in feeling normal. This theme emerged in response to several questions and was expressed in different ways. Some youth described feeling connected through participation in activities such as sports or work. Others found connection through time spent with family and friends. Many also identified their IL worker as a key source of nonjudgmental social and emotional support during their transition to adulthood. These insights reinforce the importance of

positive, trusting relationships as central to a youth’s sense of normalcy and well-being. When normalcy was absent, youth described experiencing **anxiety, depression, and stress**.

Another common theme was the recognition that **traumatic past events**, while once perceived as normal, were not. This realization was most often expressed in response to questions about what normalcy looks like and how their understanding of it has changed over time. Youth also spoke about **“parentification”**, where they had to take on adult responsibilities early in life, sometimes caring for themselves in the absence of adult support.

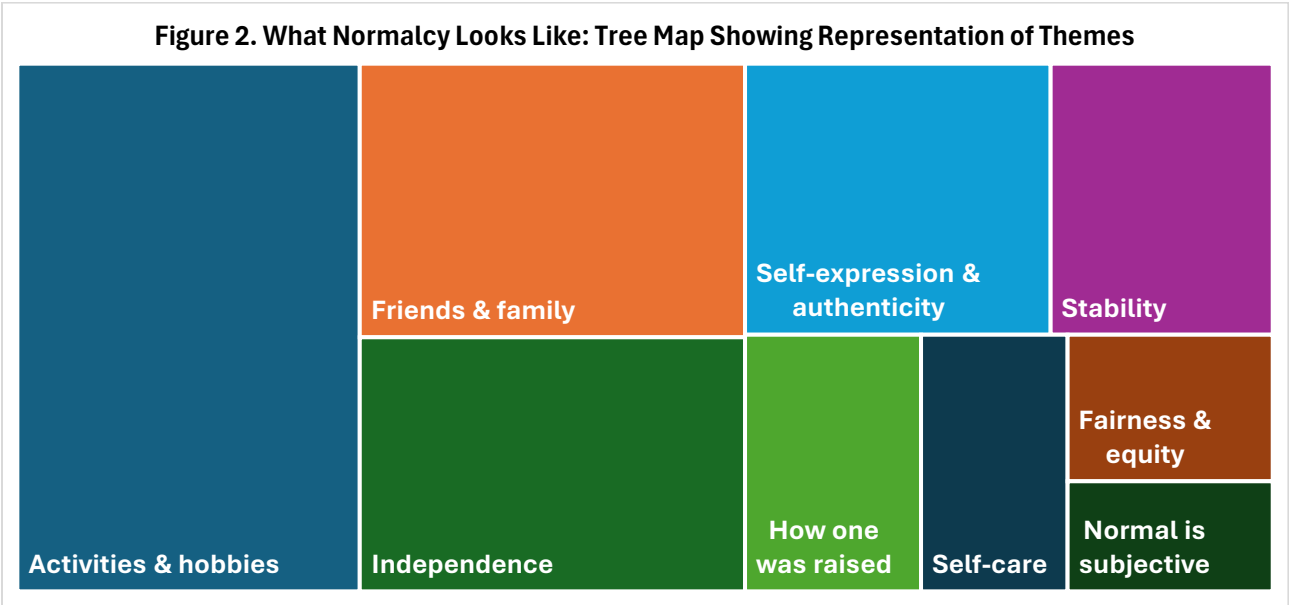
A third theme that emerged across questions was a strong desire for **independence and autonomy**. Youth expressed wanting adults, especially family members, to support their growing maturity with age-appropriate rules and opportunities (e.g., having a job, driving, privacy), and to respect their experiences and decision-making abilities. In some cases, youth identified foster parents and IL workers as particularly supportive in this regard. In others, they described having to rely on themselves, practice coping skills, and advocate for their own needs when support was lacking.

Finally, a theme related to **fairness and equality** appeared across responses to multiple questions. Youth often shared experiences of being treated differently than foster siblings or being excluded from activities or possessions that their peers were allowed to have. While some youth expressed understanding of the reasons behind these differences and used coping skills and practiced acceptance, others described less healthy coping strategies, such as emotional suppression or isolation.

What Normalcy Looks Like

What does normalcy look like to you? What are some things that make you feel “normal?”

Youth expressed a variety of ways that normalcy looked to them. Figure 2 visualizes the relative frequency of themes identified in their responses about what “normalcy” means. Each colored area represents a theme, with its size corresponding to how often that theme was mentioned. The most frequently referenced themes include *Activities and Hobbies*, *Friends and Family*, *Independence*, and *Self-Expression and Authenticity*, highlighting the importance of engagement, social connection, and the ability to be oneself in youths’ experiences of normalcy.



- **Activities and hobbies**
 - Many youth reported feelings of normalcy when participating in activities and hobbies including the following:
 - Working (employment)
 - Organized activities such as sports, clubs, JROTC, and theater
 - Informal activities and hobbies such as listening to music, gardening, shopping, video games, and working out
 - Social activities such as attending parties, dances, and sporting events
- **Friends and family**
 - Several youth said that having supportive relationships with friends and family helped them feel normalcy. In particular, youth mentioned that normal could look like just hanging out with friends or family, listening to music together, or going to a game with friends. However, one youth described how family might also decrease feelings of normalcy if they restricted these opportunities.
- **Independence**
 - Several youth commented on the importance of having independence to feel normalcy. What that looked like varied and included things like:
 - Choosing the type of school they attend (e.g., public, Catholic)
 - Cooking for themselves
 - Driving or using public transportation
 - Having a job and buying a car
 - Staying out late and traveling
 - Doing activities they enjoy
 - Some youth also described independence as not having to do certain things, such as caring for siblings or identifying they were with their caseworker in public.
- **Self-expression and authenticity**
 - Some youth mentioned that the ability to express themselves authentically supported feelings of normalcy. They emphasized wanting to “be themselves,” wear their hair how they want, and dress how they want, without having to put up a façade. They wanted to be with friends who would laugh with them, not at them.
- **Stability**
 - Some youth identified stability and safety as important to feeling normalcy. This included:
 - Being in a comfortable place where one feels safe being themselves and expressing their emotions
 - Having a stable home environment and not having to move all the time
 - Having a consistent schedule and stable routine
 - Knowing what to expect at home, school, and work
- **How one was raised**
 - Some youth noted that how they were raised seemed normal at the time, but they later realized their upbringing was not healthy. Growing up in a chaotic environment, not feeling valued, and having early mental health issues were examples of unhealthy early experiences.
- **Self-care**
 - Some youth described experiences related to personal growth and self-care as helpful in feeling more normal. These included activities such as sleeping, practicing mindfulness, reading, listening to music, attending therapy, exercising, and engaging in hobbies like gardening.

- **Fairness and equity**
 - A few youth described wanting to be treated “normal” and held to the same standards and expectations as others was also mentioned. They expressed wanting the same opportunities and privileges that other youth have.
- **Normal is subjective**
 - A few youth expressed that there is no single definition of “normal,” as it varies from person to person. They suggested that “appropriate” might be a more fitting term, emphasizing that what feels right depends on individual standards, needs, and perspectives.

How Normalcy Impacts Mental and Emotional Health

How does normalcy impact your mental and emotional health?

Youth described how the presence or absence of normalcy influenced their mental and emotional health.

Figure 3 visualizes the relative frequency of themes that emerged from their responses. Each colored section represents a distinct theme, with its size reflecting how often that theme was mentioned. The most frequently referenced themes were *Impacts on Mental Health*, where youth shared specific ways normalcy affected their well-being, and *Belonging and Social Connections*, which emphasized the importance of relationships in shaping their sense of normalcy and mental health. Other themes included *Equality and Fairness*, *Stability and Safety*, *Coping Strategies*, *Self-Worth*, and *Cultural Adaptation*, each representing a different way that normalcy, or its absence, shaped youth experiences of mental and emotional health.

Figure 3. How Normalcy Impacts Mental Health: Tree Map Showing Representation of Themes



- **Impacts on mental health**
 - Many youth described how the absence of normalcy contributed to a range of difficult emotions, including feeling different, confused, lonely, depressed, anxious, envious, frustrated, and angry. Some noted that this lack of normalcy was emotionally exhausting and intensified pre-existing mental health challenges.
 - In contrast, when youth did experience a sense of normalcy, they reported improvements in mental well-being. They felt safer, less anxious and stressed, slept better, and experienced protection against feelings of alienation.
- **Belonging and social connection**
 - Many youth shared that opportunities for social relationships and activities such as attending parties, dances, and other gatherings have a significant (positive) impact on their mental health and overall well-being. However, they noted that growing up without a sense of normalcy made it difficult to make friends, fit in, or even talk with others. This could lead to feelings of hurt, anxiety, and social exclusion.

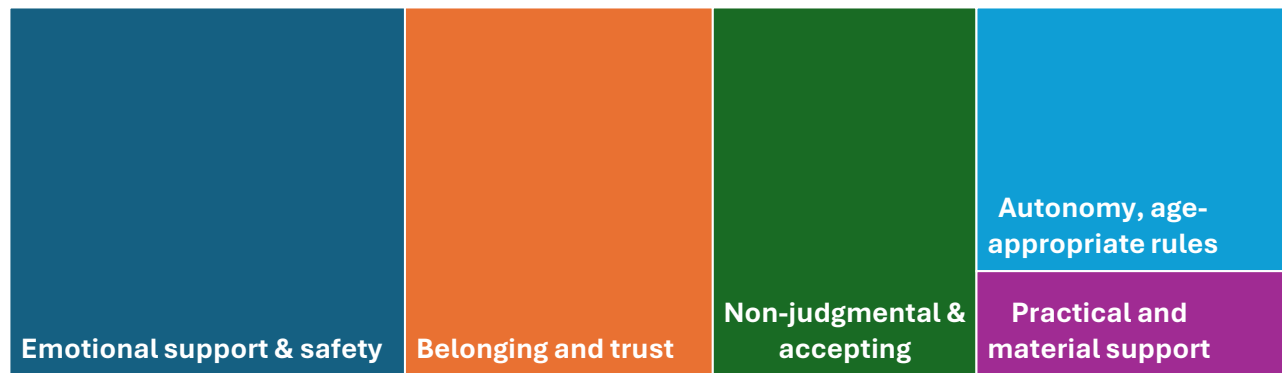
- Some youth also pointed out that even when social connections existed, it could still be hard to ask for help, especially for young men.
- **Equality and fairness**
 - Several youth shared that they did not feel treated equally within their families. They felt that foster families gave more attention and care to their biological or adopted children, especially when it came to discipline, emotional support, and recognition. Some youth described feeling put to the side.
 - Others expressed that it felt unfair not to have the same experiences as their peers, such as getting a driver's permit, staying out late, or participating in spontaneous sleepovers.
- **Stability and safety**
 - Some youth described how experiencing normalcy helped them feel more stable and safer. In contrast, instability such as frequent moves required them to constantly adjust to new environments and reduced their sense of joy. A few youth shared that they had to create their own safe spaces with music and hobbies to feel a sense of normalcy.
- **Coping strategies**
 - Some youth described a variety of ways they supported their mental health and adapted when things were difficult. These included going to therapy, finding hobbies such as music, gardening, or photography, practicing mindfulness, maintaining a positive mindset, and setting high expectations for themselves.
- **Self-worth**
 - A few youth shared that experiencing normalcy helped boost their self-esteem, while the absence of normalcy diminished it. This was often in the context of peer relationships. For example, one youth described feeling undesirable or not good enough to be chosen by others at a school dance. Another mentioned not being invited to spend time with classmates or neighbors because their family was less fortunate.
- **Cultural adaptation**
 - A few youth described additional challenges related to adapting to a new culture. One youth who immigrated to the United States as a teenager shared that it was difficult to feel a sense of normalcy when their foster family pressured them to adapt to a new culture. Later, a different foster family embraced a broader understanding of normalcy, which helped the youth feel more welcomed and comfortable being themselves.

How Family and Friends Support Normalcy

How do your family and friends help you feel “normal?” Please provide some examples. What do you need from your family and friends to help you feel “normal” that you aren’t getting?

Youth described how their family and friends supported feeling “normal.” Figure 4 shows the relative frequency of themes that emerged from their responses. Each colored section represents a distinct theme, with its size reflecting how often that theme was mentioned. The most frequently referenced themes were *Emotional Support and Safety* and *Belonging and Trust*. Other ways family and friends supported normalcy included being *Non-Judgmental and Accepting*, offering *Autonomy and Age-Appropriate Rules*, and providing *Practical and Material Support*.

Figure 4. How Family and Friends Support Normalcy: Tree Map Showing Representation of Themes



- **Emotional support and safety**

- Many youth emphasized the importance of emotional support from family and friends. This support took several forms, including:
 - communicating through calls or texts to check in
 - supporting their goals such as going to college or participating in sports
 - being present to listen, whether about everyday matters or deeper issues like past trauma and personal needs
- Some youth also described how the absence of emotional support from their biological families was hurtful. Examples included being referred to as “the government kid,” having calls ignored, not being contacted on their birthday, being blamed for what happened, being asked to lie to caseworkers, or being told that a parent wanted to commit suicide because of the situation.
- Several youth made a distinction between the emotional support and safety provided by their biological families and the support they received from their chosen families including friends, independent living staff, and other trusted adults.

- **Belonging and trust**

- Many youth described how family and friends helped foster a sense of belonging and trust through both their actions and their restraint. This included:

What they do:

- Being dependable
- Treating youth the same as biological children in the home
- Trusting that youth know what support they need

What they do not do:

- Defining youth by their past or holding their situation against them
- Violating their privacy, such as looking through their phone
- Lying to or manipulating them

- **Non-judgmental and accepting**

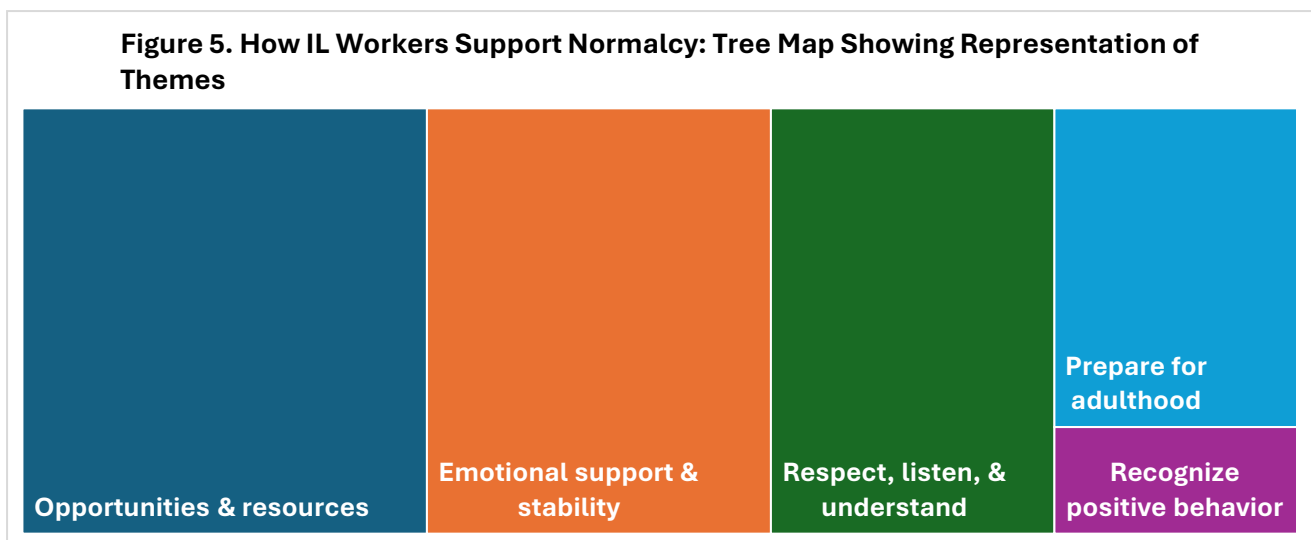
- Several youth shared that feeling accepted without judgment from family and friends was important for their sense of normalcy and emotional well-being. What helped included:
 - Showing that they are lovable and worthy of acceptance
 - Allowing youth to be their real selves
 - Listening instead of judging
 - Not assuming, but seeking to understand
 - Relating to what youth are going through
 - Having faith in youth
 - Less judgment helps to create a stable, family environment

- **Autonomy and age-appropriate rules**
 - Several youth emphasized the importance of having autonomy and rules that reflect their age and experiences. They shared:
 - Recognizing that many had to take on adult roles and responsibilities early, such as raising siblings or becoming independent at a young age
 - For some, this meant letting youth have a childhood and be teenagers again. For others, it meant acknowledging how difficult it can be to return to a child–parent relationship after having to serve as the adult
 - Providing flexibility in rules based on age, such as curfews and going out with friends
- **Practical and material support**
 - A few youth described how family can be supportive by providing what they need (e.g., money, clothes, a phone, getting a driver’s license, starting a healthier lifestyle, etc.).

How Independent Living Workers Support Normalcy

How does your IL worker help you feel “normal?” What do you need from your IL worker to help you feel “normal” that you aren’t getting?

Youth described how their Independent Living (IL) workers support normalcy. Figure 5 shows the relative frequency of themes that emerged from their responses. Each colored section represents a distinct theme, with its size reflecting how often that theme was mentioned. The most frequently referenced themes were *Opportunities and Resources*, *Emotional Support and Safety*, and *Respect, Listen, and Understand*. Other ways IL workers supported normalcy included helping youth *Prepare for Adulthood* and *Recognize Positive Behavior*.



- **Opportunities and resources**
 - Youth described how Independent Living (IL) workers helped provide access to important opportunities and resources that supported their growth and reduced stress:
 - Financial support for clothes, sports equipment, and other needs
 - Help open a bank account and get a driver’s license
 - Help obtain documents like a Social Security card
 - Assistance finding activities and providing gift cards
 - Support in finding a better home (e.g., transitioning out of juvenile detention)
 - Opportunities to attend summer camp and reconnect with siblings

- Some youth noted that financial support varied by county, which felt unfair
- **Emotional support and stability**
 - Youth emphasized the emotional role IL workers played in helping them feel safe, supported, and understood:
 - Listening and respecting how youth feel
 - Advocating for youth and staying in their corner
 - Balancing independence with honesty, even when it means sharing difficult truths
 - Attending youth events and supporting them in family conflicts
 - Standing up for youth, even within their own families
 - A few youth said IL workers could improve by checking in more often, following through on promises, and ensuring access to needed resources.
- **Respect, listen, and understand**
 - Youth described several ways IL workers showed them respect and understanding:
 - Youth felt heard and respected; they were allowed to feel the way they do
 - In their corner and advocating for them; will not give up on the youth
 - Balance supporting independence with help and honesty (e.g., being supportive sometimes means telling youth difficult truths)
- **Prepare for adulthood**
 - IL workers helped youth prepare for independence including:
 - Help get a job, car, or find an apartment
 - Signing up for college classes, and finding scholarships
 - In one case, becoming a U.S. citizen
- **Recognize positive behavior**
 - Youth reported IL workers recognized their good grades and attended their sporting events
 - One noted it was important to pay attention to their good behavior, so youth don't feel the need to get attention from bad behavior

How to Cope When Not Allowed to Participate in Activities

As a current or former youth in foster care, how do you cope with situations when peers are able to participate in an activity that you were not permitted to do?

Youth described how they coped when not allowed to participate in activities. Figure 6 shows the relative frequency of themes that emerged from their responses. Each colored section represents a distinct theme, with its size reflecting how often that theme was mentioned. The most frequently referenced themes were *Engaging in Alternative Activities* and *Self-Reflection and Emotional Regulation*. Other coping strategies included *Self-Reliance*, *Acceptance*, *Emotional Suppression and Isolation*, and *Advocacy and Communication*. Note that not all coping strategies were necessarily healthy ones. Moreover, one youth mentioned that they cannot cope.

However, in one group, youth focused on identifying various activities they could not participate in (for example, sleepovers) and the reasons why not, rather than how they coped with those experiences. In this case, it was not possible to determine whether youth did not know how to cope or simply did not respond to the prompt. Nonetheless, it was clear that the lack of participation impacted their sense of normalcy. For example, one youth described how having a sleepover required a background check or drug testing of another's parents in advance, which was embarrassing because they did not want others to know about their situation.

Figure 6. How to Cope When Not Allowed to Participate in Activities: Tree Map Showing Representation of Themes

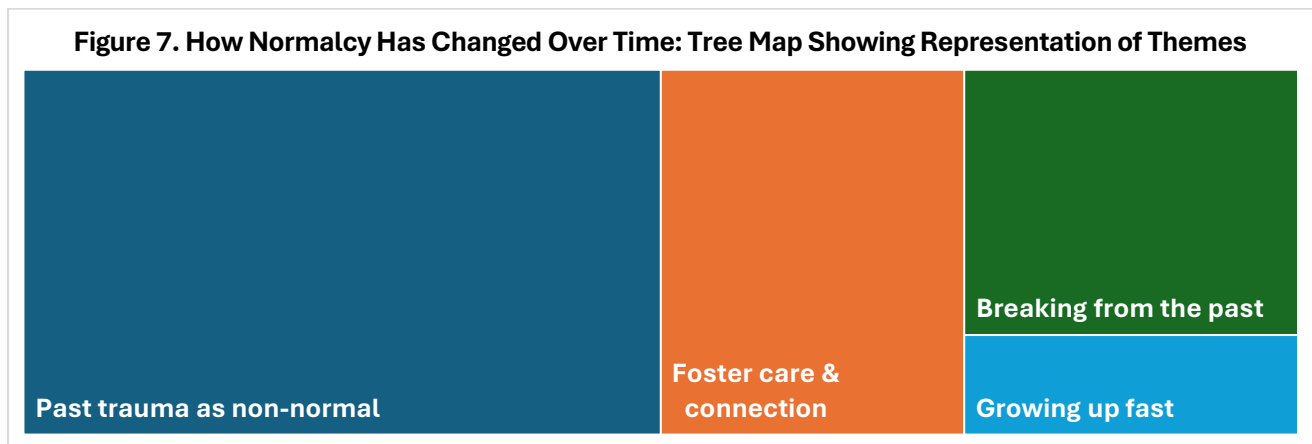


- **Engage in alternative activities**
 - Youth described redirecting their attention or energy to other activities when not allowed to participate in activities like their peers. Examples of these alternatives included focusing on something else (e.g., school), going to church, and sleeping.
- **Self-reflection and emotional regulation**
 - Some youth described practicing coping skills to manage their emotions and reflect on their experiences. These strategies helped them process feelings like anger, jealousy, or disappointment. Examples included: talking with a caseworker, thinking about the things they can do (instead of what they cannot do), avoid comparing themselves with others, reflecting on who or what is really causing the emotion, recognizing that there will be other chances, and working harder next time to earn the opportunity.
- **Self-reliance**
 - Youth often relied on themselves or found ways to navigate restrictions independently. This sometimes reflected that youth were used to caring for themselves (because they've always had to do that) and/or had learned not to ask for help from others. In other cases, youth used others' resources (for example, borrowing a phone), met with friends without adult approval, or resigned that they didn't need anyone else.
- **Acceptance**
 - Some youth responded by accepting the situation, even if it felt unfair, and trying to understand that it's not anyone's fault. This acceptance was sometimes framed as understanding the rules or the system's intentions to keep them safe.
- **Emotional suppression and isolation**
 - A few youth described coping by shutting down emotionally or withdrawing from others. These strategies (e.g., holding in anger, avoiding others or not talking to them, trying not to care, forgetting about the situation) were not necessarily healthy ones.
- **Advocacy and communication**
 - Some youth responded by speaking up for themselves or seeking help from the IL worker to advocate for their needs.

How Normalcy Has Changed Over Time

How has your idea of “normal” changed over time?

Youth described how their view of normalcy has changed over time. Figure 7 shows the relative frequency of themes that emerged from their responses. Each colored section represents a distinct theme, with its size reflecting how often that theme was mentioned. The most frequently referenced theme was *Past Trauma as Non-Normal*, highlighting how many youth view their past experiences as outside the bounds of what they now consider typical. *Foster Care and Connection* and *A Personal Normal* were mentioned next most often, suggesting a focus on relationships and individualized definitions of normalcy. *Independence* and *Responsibility* followed, indicating emerging values around self-reliance and maturity.



- **Past trauma as non-normal**

- Many youth described how their understanding of "normal" has shifted. What once felt typical in their upbringing is now recognized as harmful, unstable, or neglectful.

What was considered normal:

- Living in unsafe environments (e.g., abuse, neglect, lack of food, food used as punishment, presence of rats)
- Growing up around addiction (e.g., caregivers who were high or incapacitated)
- Being isolated or restricted to the home (e.g., one youth described being locked in a room with a port-a-potty)
- Absent or unhealthy relationships (e.g., absent father, toxic romantic relationships)
- Missing typical milestones (e.g., no job, no driving permit)

What is considered normal now:

- Engaging in everyday activities and routines (e.g., having a bedtime, going to school, having a job, hanging out with friends)
- Gaining independence (e.g., being able to leave the house, eat when hungry)
- Healthy relationships (e.g., asking for support, accepting affection, dating)
- Healthy emotions (e.g., showing empathy, feeling self-confident)

- **Foster care and connection**

- Several youth described foster care as a positive turning point in their lives and understanding of normalcy. Through new relationships, they began to understand what healthy connection and normalcy could look like. These included:
 - Significant others modeled what “normal” could be
 - Friends who were not raised in neglectful environments offered contrast and perspective

- Conversations with friends' parents helped youth identify what hadn't been normal in their own upbringing
- Family and friends helped teach them right from wrong
- **Breaking from the past**
 - Several youth described a conscious commitment not to repeat the negative experiences of their past and to create a different future for themselves and their families. To that end, they expressed a growing sense of agency and emotional maturity.
 - Pursuing a future different from what they experienced
 - Choosing who they want to be as adults and building their own path forward
 - Accepting that life won't be easy, but recognizing they do have control over themselves
 - Practicing emotional regulation, making good decisions, and leading by example
 - Recognizing that "normal" looks different for everyone and may still be evolving
- **Growing up fast**
 - A few youth described how they had to grow up quickly. For some, this was negative. They felt "parentified," expected to take on adult roles such as working and managing household responsibilities, often without support and at the expense of having a childhood (see *Additional Theme* below). For others, they believed this early experience helped them function as adults.

Additional Theme

- **Parentification**
 - Across several questions and in discussions that extended beyond the focus groups prompts, youth shared experiences of stepping into adult roles early. These included caring for siblings, managing responsibilities, and providing emotional support. Employment was also described in this context. For some, work was required rather than desired and part of parentification. This contrasted with how others described work as a desired opportunity that offered a sense of normalcy.

Insights and Recommendations

The following insights and recommendations are grounded in what youth shared about their experiences and understanding of normalcy. They emphasize ways to support youth normalcy and well-being.

Support access to enriching activities. Participation in activities like sports, clubs, theater, and jobs was a strong theme in how youth described feeling normal. These opportunities can foster belonging and identity, and research shows they help prevent problem behaviors and support positive youth development. Youth who lacked normalcy often linked it to poor mental health. Many also described being "parentified" growing up, which may have limited their involvement in such activities. **Encouraging participation in enrichment activities, reducing barriers like cost or transportation, and recognizing activity-related achievements may promote both well-being and a sense of normalcy.**

Recognize youth's need for autonomy and identity. Youth described feeling normal when they had the freedom to make everyday choices and express themselves authentically. This included decisions about clothing, makeup, and spending time with friends. **Supporting autonomy by offering real choices and respecting personal expression may help promote both a sense of normalcy and well-being.**

Foster belonging through peer connection. Youth shared that feeling connected to peers had a powerful impact on their mental health. Everyday social experiences like conversations, school events, and informal hangouts helped them feel more normal and less alone. Some youth also described struggling with isolation and anxiety. **Supporting social skill development and offering more chances to connect with peers in safe, welcoming settings may help youth feel seen, valued, and emotionally supported.**

Ensure equitable treatment. Several youth described feeling overlooked or treated unfairly in foster care, especially compared to biological children in the same home. This unequal treatment affected their self-worth and emotional well-being. **Promoting fairness in expectations, support, and recognition may help youth feel respected and emotionally safe.**

Center emotional support in relationships. Youth said they felt normalcy when family, friends, or trusted adults checked in, supported their goals, and listened when they needed to talk. Some described negative consequences to mental health when emotional support was missing, especially from biological family. **Actions like calling or texting, being present, and offering encouragement may help youth feel emotionally safe and more like themselves.**

Respect youth experience through age-appropriate flexibility. Youth said that feeling normal often depended on being treated in ways that matched both their age and life experience. Some wanted the chance to be teenagers again after taking on adult responsibilities too early. Others needed their independence to be acknowledged. **Providing age-appropriate flexibility in curfews, social rules, and expectations can help youth feel respected and more like their peers.**

Recognize and support the role of IL workers in promoting normalcy. Youth described IL workers as key sources of support, connection, and opportunity. They valued workers who listened, recognized their achievements, advocated for them, helped with practical needs, and showed up consistently. **To continue this impact, ensure IL workers have the time, resources, and support needed to build strong relationships and follow through on commitments, so youth continue to feel seen, supported, and set up for success.**

Help youth build healthy coping strategies when excluded from activities. Youth described a range of ways they coped when not allowed to participate in activities like their peers. Some found positive outlets, but others withdrew, shut down, or felt ashamed. A few said they didn't know how to cope at all. **Supporting youth in these moments by validating their emotions and, where needed, helping them build healthy coping skills seems important.**

Support youth in redefining normal. Youth shared that their idea of normal has changed over time. For several, what once felt typical is now seen as harmful or unstable. Through foster care, friendships, and personal growth, many describe forming a new understanding of normalcy centered on safety, connection, and emotional well-being. **Supporting youth as they reflect on their past and work to develop new paths forward may help them achieve a new, healthy sense of normal.**

Appendix A. Focus Group Questions

Question	What are we trying to get out of these questions?
1) To get started, let's go around and say your name, age, and what county you are from.	Warm up and get a sense of who is represented in the group
2) What does normalcy look like to you? <i>Additional optional prompt:</i> What are some things that make you feel "normal?"	How youth identify their normal
3) How does normalcy impact your mental and emotional health?	If there is a connection to youth mental/emotional health
4) How do your family and friends help you feel "normal?" Please provide some examples. <i>Additional optional prompt:</i> What do you need from your family and friends to help you feel "normal" that you aren't getting?	How family and friends can support normalcy
5) How does your IL worker help you feel "normal?" <i>Additional optional prompt:</i> What do you need from your IL worker to help you feel "normal" that you aren't getting?	How IL workers support normalcy
6) As a current or former youth in foster care, how do you cope with situations when peers are able to participate in an activity that you were not permitted to do?	Coping/advocacy skills
7) How has your idea of "normal" changed over time?	How experiences have impacted youths' view of normalcy