

For Staff: Group Activities for Youth

Connecting the Dots

Freewrite and Discussion: 15 minutes

Make sure everyone has a pencil and paper. Introduce the idea that what happens to us when we are children shapes our behaviors and feelings as we get older. Ask everyone to fold their piece of paper in half and then unfold it. On the left-hand side, ask them to write down something that happened in their childhood that they think had a lasting impact on them. It could be a one-time event, like “a dog bit me when I was 6,” or something ongoing, like “My mom was always yelling at us.” On the right-hand side, ask them to write down how they think that event/s from the past still affect them today (e.g., “I’m still afraid of dogs,” or, “I get nervous when people yell and look for friends who are calm.”) Give them five minutes to write. Invite anyone who wants to share to read their connection aloud.

Read the Story: 10 minutes

As a group, read, “Her Hitting Taught Me Violence, Not Discipline” by E.F. (p. 8) aloud, taking turns. Let teens pass if they don’t want to read.

Discussion: 15 minutes

Ask for examples of how her mom’s violence affected E.F. [In the 2nd grade she was suspended twice for violence against others; she had to lie at school; even after she moved away from her mom and in with her grandmother, she still got in trouble for being disruptive; she felt suicidal.]

Ask what helped E.F. to change her ways. [She went to therapy and realized how her mom’s violence had affected her; she found love and support from her grandmother; she took deep breaths to avoid fighting when she was mad; she joined after-school clubs and activities; she stood up to her mom to defend her younger siblings.]

Closing: 10 minutes

Ask if they, or a friend or family member, ever figured out something that helped them change their behavior like E.F. did. How did they do it? Point out that it can be very hard to see patterns in one’s own life, and that a therapist can help them understand and start to change behavior they don’t like. E.F. made all her discoveries and self-improvements with the help of a good therapist.

Ask them to write down one behavior or habit they have that they would like to understand better. What can they do to help figure it out? ■

How Can I Help Create Family?

Freewrite and Discussion: 10 minutes

Make sure everyone has a pencil or paper. Write these prompts on the board:

—What is one activity or ritual that you think can help people feel like a family?

—What’s one thing you have tried (or would like to try) to help your family or group of friends feel closer? How did it work?

Give teens about five minutes to freewrite their responses. (They will not have to turn them in.) Then invite anyone who wants to share to read their response aloud.

Read the Story: 10 minutes

As a group, read “A Foster Mom Becomes Family” on p. 25, aloud, taking turns. Let teens pass if they want.

Discussion: 15 minutes

Make two columns on the board, headed “Do” and “Don’t.” Ask youth to identify how the author’s foster mom, Lora, gave the author a feeling of family [included him in family game and movie nights; had family meals where everyone said something they liked about being together; called him her “kid,” not her “foster kid”; helped him with his homework; told him she loved him; accepted his girlfriend’s pregnancy without judgment and offered to help with the baby] Write these under “Do.”

Then ask group members to identify what the author’s previous foster mother, Michele, didn’t do that hurt him and made him feel unwelcome [didn’t cook for him; never came to his school; didn’t talk with or listen to him; never gave him keys to the house; didn’t tell him what was going on]. List these under “Don’t.”

Then ask them for examples of things the author did to show Lora he cared. Add these to the “Do” list [told her that she was the best parent he’d ever had; didn’t hide that she was his foster mom from other people; got a few jobs and chipped in for the cable bill; took his medicine so she wouldn’t worry; cleaned the house and did errands].

Closing: 5 minutes

Ask each teen to write down one family activity or ritual—either something that was mentioned today or something else they’ve thought of—that they’d like to try doing with their family (or family of choice) in the coming weeks. ■