



Approved by NEYC & NEACWCD 2016

Defining what “normalcy” means for youth in out-of-home care, and how service providers can promote “normal” adolescent experiences for youth in their care.

Created by the New England Youth Coalition

Pending approval by the New England Child Welfare Commissioner and Director Association in 2016

Preamble:

“Normal” refers to standard or usual activities regularly experienced by youth not in out-of-home care. ‘Out-of-home care’ includes residential treatment facilities, foster homes, group homes, and placements with relatives or kin. In addition to ‘standard or usual activities’, normalcy for youth in out-of-home care includes opportunities for input and participation in decision-making for their cases and day-to-day lives.

In our definition we focus on six major areas of “Normalcy”:

1. Families
2. Social and Peer Inclusion
3. Community Inclusion
4. Cultural Awareness
5. Age-Related Milestones
6. Decision-Making

Along with defining what “Normalcy” looks like in these areas, the New England Youth Coalition hopes this document will raise awareness of the unique experiences of:

- Youth in secure facilities,
- Youth from varying ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds - including Native youth,
- Youth with non-conforming gender identification and sexual orientations, and
- Youth with disabilities.

1 - “Normalcy” and Families:

- **Key Concepts: biological families, siblings, youth-identified family, foster/group home families**

There is nothing “normal” about being removed from the home of your biological parents, but relative normalcy can be supported by maintaining connections with parents, siblings, and other youth-identified family members. Whenever possible and safe, youth shall have regular visits with their family and siblings. These familial connections and the ability to work towards healthier relationships are paramount to the overall well-being of youth.

Regardless of placement, workers and service providers must recognize that “family” as defined by the youth is a priority. Placements should respect youth’s desires around family visits and commit to accommodating for

visits, should youth choose to have them, taking into consideration the physical and emotional safety of the youth.

Efforts to recognize family as a priority include but are not limited to:

- Immediate contact between youth and their bio family at time of placement, which may include having the bio family participate in the initial placement;
- Regular phone contact between youth and their bio family , siblings, and other youth-identified family members;
- A plan to support family face-to-face time, which may include family visits at placements, in the community, or at the family home; and
- Supporting permanency planning, and including family in those plans.
- Foster parents should try to the best of their ability to incorporate youth into their families and homes.

In some cases youth may not want to have contact with members of their biological family. It is important to discuss with youth what they want when it comes to supporting normalcy with their family.

Youth-in-care have specific rights around siblings. For more information on siblings' rights, please reference the [Sibling Bill of Rights](#).

2 - “Normalcy” and Social/Peer Inclusion:

- **Key Concepts: friends, sleepovers, social media, cell phones, free time, dating and romantic relationships, curfew, LGBTQ**

Adults should approach topics with youth about friends, sleepovers, social media, cell phones and free time from a positive perspective. Often, the phrase “when clinically appropriate” is used to determine social normalcy for youth, however these words have been purposely left out of this definition of Normalcy because we believe that this kind of language has too often barred youth, especially those living in group homes, from opportunities for social and peer inclusion.

Social tools such as cell phones and social media encourage communication and allow youth to build and strengthen a wide support system; therefore it is paramount that this privilege is available to youth, and adults take on the role of teaching youth how to use these tools responsibly. Youth need oversight and guidance to become interdependent adults and in this era, this requires the ability to manage online communication methods.

Youth shall be educated on the components of healthy friendships and romantic relationships through guidance from supportive adults. In order to fully absorb what it means to have healthy friendships and romantic relationships, youth need to be given the opportunity to learn from their experiences.

Foster children shall be able to have a normal and flexible curfew that doesn't prohibit participation in opportunities that build supportive social networks and encourage community involvement.

Requiring friends and their families to submit to background checks before allowing youth to attend a sleepover is not normal and can put a strain on relationships. There are less intrusive and faster ways to determine if an environment is safe. As with all parenting decisions, the youth's caregiver shall determine if the sleepover is appropriate, just as they would with a biological child*. Additionally, the people youth are permitted to spend time with shall not be dictated by gender or sex. It is important that the unique needs of each youth are considered when making decisions about sleepovers, keeping in mind that often youth who identify as LGBTQ** have been denied overnights with opposite-sex friends while also being denied same-sex friends.

*This concept is referred to by the professional community as the *Prudent Parenting Standard*.

**See section 4

3 - “Normalcy” and Community Inclusion:

- **Key Concepts: extracurricular activities, community events, school sponsored events, camps, work/employment, mentorships, volunteering, curfew**

Youth in care shall have opportunities to build relationships within their home and school communities equal to their peers not in care. Allowing young people to be fully engaged in their communities gives them the ability to find welcoming and judgment-free environments, build supportive and interdependent relationships with members of their community, develop social skills, and engage in resume-building activities. Youth shall be allowed access to tools to help them be successful and stay involved in their communities; such as a personal email and cell phone.

Examples of community involvement include, but are not limited to:

- Volunteering;
- Participating in sports teams and other extra-curricular clubs and lessons;
- Attending school or community sponsored events, including field trips or dances;
- Going to camp;
- Having a part-time job;
- Joining a mentor program;
- Being involved in faith-based or other cultural programs; and
- Joining other activities that provide support and structure for youth.

Youth in care occasionally experience barriers to community involvement because of strict curfews. To avoid negative limitations, curfews shall be set on a case-by-case basis between youth and their caregivers, allowing for exceptions to regular curfews for special occasions and activities that promote healthy community involvement.

Normalcy is not: having to plan days or weeks ahead for any occasion.

Normalcy is: being able to accommodate opportunities as they become available.

4 - “Normalcy” and Cultural Awareness:

- **Key Concepts: piercings and tattoos, music, clothing, cultural norms, religious beliefs, personal customs and traditions, LGBTQ*, Native Youth****

Youth in care shall be able to express themselves as they choose, because all people have the right to enjoy freedom, acceptance, and safety regardless of their circumstances. Youth in care shall not be restricted in practicing personal religious or cultural customs, listening to their choice of music, wearing their preferred style of clothing, or participating in activities that help build their self-esteem and establish a sense of self.

Any spiritual, religious, or cultural beliefs that the youth wishes to observe shall be respected, and youth shall be supported to participate in any activities associated with their religious beliefs. Additionally, youth shall not be required to participate in the religious activities of the family with whom they reside if those practices are contrary to their own beliefs.

It is often within cultural norms for youth to want to get piercings or tattoos. Each state sets their own rules around piercings and tattoos for youth in care, but the desires of youth shall be taken into account and respected, and decisions shall be made with the guidance of a supportive adult.

All service providers and homes that care for youth who identify as LGBTQ must be allies of the LGBTQ community and dedicated to making youth feel safe and respected while in their care. Ways to be an ally include paying attention to language, such as pronoun use and appropriate jargon, respecting youth’s choices around physical appearance, and respecting their relationships. Furthermore, issues of gender and self-discovery shall be left up to the individual in care. For example, if a transgender youth wants to begin transitioning while in care, that youth shall not be denied access to those services unless it poses a risk to their physical health. Due to the high rates of suicide among this population, special care shall be given to making sure each individual is comfortable and well-supported.

The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) protects children and youth who belong to a federally recognized Native American Tribe. However, there are still many tribes (and subsets of tribes) that are not recognized by the ICWA. These tribes are distinct to themselves, having their own traditions, languages, cultures, and communities; therefore this document asserts that federally and non-federally recognized tribes should be included in the definition of normalcy for Native youth. Native youth are part of a group that face significant risk in the United States, because many of their communities experience widespread poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence, and chronic health problems at much higher rates than non-Native communities. According to national statistics, the general well-being of Native children falls significantly behind children from other ethnic groups.

For these reasons, and to protect the rich heritage of these communities, Native Youth shall be placed with families supportive of their culture and spirituality, shall be driven to cultural events when and where appropriate, and shall be supported to attend cultural camps provided by the youth's tribe.

Service providers shall understand that youth in out-of-home care are in a precarious life situation, and the strangers they are placed with are not always culturally supportive. If this situation arises, youth shall be supported in finding a more appropriate placement.

**LGBTQ is shorthand for LGBTQQIAAP, which represents youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, allies, and pansexual.*

***Native Youth include any youth who self-identify as Native and those who have been steeped in Native culture in their pre-foster care lives.*

5 - "Normalcy" and Decision-Making:

- **Key Concepts: decision-making, appropriate consequences**

"Normalcy" for decision-making means including youth in the decision-making process for anything that affects their lives, including medical and mental health decisions. This means being able to make their own age-appropriate choices, with guidance from trusted peers and adults - even when others fear the youth might make a mistake. Allowing youth to practice making healthy decisions on their own is an important step in becoming a mature adult and developing self advocacy skills.

We understand that sometimes young people make poor choices that must be met with consequences. "Normal" consequences are those which are situational and age appropriate, and which could be applied to youth not in care who have made similar missteps. For example, visitations with family members shall not be dependent on good behavior.

6 - "Normalcy" and Age-Related Milestones:

- **Key Concepts: driver's license, banking and money management, birthdays, allowance**

Youth in care shall be supported to reach age-related milestones. Examples of these milestones include, but are not limited to:

- Getting a driver's license;
- Opening a bank account and learning money management skills;
- Adjusting curfews and allowances, and allowing for romantic relationships to support increases in freedom as youth mature;
- Celebrating birthdays, graduations, and other achievements; and
- Taking steps to prepare for adulthood, higher education, and the work force.

DISCLAIMER: The right of youth in care to normalcy exists within the context of the reasonable and prudent parent standard, meaning that parents and caretakers must make careful and sensible parental decisions that maintain the health, safety and best interests of a child or youth.