

SHARING YOUR PERSONAL STORY

A Guide for Youth and Families on How To Share Their Experience With The Juvenile and Criminal Justice Systems

CAMPAIGN FOR
YOUTH JUSTICE



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ABOUT THE CAMPAIGN FOR YOUTH JUSTICE:

The Campaign for Youth Justice (CFYJ) is a national nonprofit organization working to end the practice of trying, sentencing, and incarcerating youth in the adult criminal justice system. Part of our work involves improving the juvenile justice system and ensuring that youth and families have a voice in justice system reform efforts.

CFYJ was started in 2005 by a family member whose child was being prosecuted in the adult system. Since our founding, we have placed a significant emphasis on making sure that youth and families who have been directly affected by the justice system are involved in our advocacy efforts. We believe that personal stories are important and help to put a face on the 250,000 youth tried, sentenced and incarcerated as adults each year.

CFYJ is deeply committed to cultivating spokespersons to tell the story why children should not be treated the same as adults are in the criminal justice system. Readers interested learning more about CFYJ or interested on joining our Spokesperson Bureau can email info@cfyj.org or call (202) 558-3580.

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THIS BOOKLET IS FOR...

This booklet is a resource for people who have had experience with the juvenile or the adult criminal justice systems, and who want to share their own personal experience; or who want to invite others to share in order to educate and influence. This booklet is also intended for educators, trainers, and facilitators to use as a study guide for groups of people who are learning to educate and influence through sharing their personal experiences.

WHY SHARING YOUR STORY IS IMPORTANT

For some people, sharing a personal story is easy. For others, it takes time and courage. People often share personal information when they feel comfortable and at ease with the person to whom they are talking. So, why is it that you have been asked to share your personal story?

Your story puts a relatable face on the people that are in the criminal justice system, shattering stereotypes and misconceptions about what our justice system is or is not. Your story can affect change.

Once our lawmakers, media, general public and community hear about your experience and the experiences of other youth and families within our justice system, their perspective can change. They can be inspired and motivated to change policies and laws that address the way we treat our children and youth. They can also just develop a different frame of reference on those impacted by our criminal justice system. Sharing your story can have a positive and direct impact on the treatment and outcomes of other youth and families in the criminal justice system.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SHARING YOUR STORY: *The Value and Power of Your Story*

When an expert speaks, people listen. Why? Because they are knowledgeable in their area of expertise – they may have studied it for many years or they may have learned through experience. The same can be said of you. In your life, you are the expert. You have experienced a number of situations from which you have learned. You have also collected information about those situations that can be shared as knowledge to others. You may not realize it, but you do this every day. We share our lessons with others and react to situations based off of past experiences — struggles and triumphs.

Sharing your story is no different. Your experience is a powerful tool that can help others make positive changes. You have experience in the juvenile and/or criminal justice systems which you can use to educate others.

For various reasons, many laws are passed without getting information from the people that have been directly affected by them. The voices of families and youth involved in the criminal justice system are not at the table when key decisions on such issues are made, even though they are the ones that are directly affected by these laws. By participating in changing laws or raising awareness of issues by speaking to lawmakers, judges, prosecutors the media and public, you are playing an extremely valuable role in changing systems. You are the expert that can weigh in, based off of your personal experience.

Your real life testimonial provides crucial information to lawmakers because you are speaking from your personal experience. This makes you trustworthy and reliable.



Dwayne Betts, Chair of CFYJ's Spokesperson Bureau, prepares to be interviewed about his experience being a youth tried as an adult.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Sharing your story can yield many positive results including the creation of legislation that can change the way that youth involved in the juvenile and/or criminal justice systems and their families are treated; securing more funding for services to those involved in the system; and educating the public on what really happens to youth and their families involved in the adult criminal justice system.

When your state legislators or Members of Congress create laws, they ask the public to comment on them before they are presented to the entire legislature for voting. It is their responsibility to hear the public's perspective and ideally, take that into careful consideration when drafting the proposed law. It is in these meetings where a person's story is often shared. These stories can also be told in front of the entire legislative body before they vote. The story may just be told at a local event, before a small group. There are many ways and means to share your story.

People want to hear from YOU! Your personal story is going to help advise them. It is going to help them gather information and hear a different perspective. You are essential in helping them better understand why and how they should act on juvenile and/or criminal justice issues.

The concerns mentioned below are very common emotions that many people feel with coming forward and speaking about an extremely personal and emotionally charged situation. Once again, you are not alone as there are others that share your experience.

Memories evoke emotions; some painful, some embarrassing, some happy and some sad. What you have experienced is off limits until YOU are ready to share it. You are in the driver's seat and are responsible for creating the ground rules by which you want to share.

Here are some tips to help you deliver your message:

- Start out by talking to other youth and family members that can identify with you and your situation. This will not only help you not to feel isolated and alone, but it will also help you get more comfortable with speaking publicly.
- Share only what makes you feel comfortable: Certain parts of your personal story may be too painful to talk about and/or some aspects may make you feel uncomfortable. These portions can and should be off limits. You should only share what makes you comfortable at a time when you are ready.

COMMON CONCERNS FROM SPEAKERS

- "I'm afraid and uncomfortable as it was a painful experience."
- "What about my reputation? I don't want people to know about my situation."

HOW AND WHAT TO SHARE:

Tips For Successfully Sharing Your Story

Many reporters can make you feel comfortable and at ease by talking to them, providing you the opportunity to let your guard down and share more than you intended to share. After the interview, you may feel misled or wish that you didn't share as much information. This feeling is called sharing remorse. Sharing remorse happens when you feel embarrassed or guilty after you share your story. To avoid such situations, remember to ALWAYS stick to your message and invite a member from your organization or family member to attend. They can help by ensuring that you only say what you intended to and can intervene when necessary; thus, taking the pressure off of you to respond.

DURING SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS

The challenge that most people have with public speaking is that they don't know what to say or how to say it. By working closely with an organization and gathering important background information, you can practice delivering your message in front of others and incorporate feedback to make your message and delivery stronger. When you do, you will succeed at getting your points across.

Prepare – Secure background information on the event by asking the following questions:

- Ask for the meeting agenda or program
- What are the goals for the organization that you are working with?
- What is the audience looking forward to hear me talk about?
- What are the demographics of the audience?
- Are there specific questions that they can provide you in advance? This can be asked for a speaking engagement as well as with an interview.
- Will a reporter(s) be attending?
- Will they be filming? Are cameras allowed?
- Has the reporter covered this issue before? If so, what is their angle? Will I have to interview with the reporter? If so, how long will that be?
- What should I wear? How will I get there on time? How long will the event last?

WHEN SPEAKING TO REPORTERS

- You don't have to talk to them right then, but ask to speak at another time.
- Contact an ally / partnering organization (they can help you strategize on what to say, act as a buffer, be on the phone with you and the reporter).
- Be sure to ask for their deadline. This is the time that they have to turn in their story and also provides you with an idea of how much time you have to respond.

WHEN SHARING YOUR STORY TAKES AN UNEXPECTED TURN

“There is always something to upset the most careful of human calculations” – Ihara Saikaku



CFYJ Spokesperson Tracy McClard lost her 17 year-old son Jonathan, in Missouri’s criminal justice system. Here she testifies on Capitol Hill. Through being a spokesperson McClard has educated countless numbers of people on youth who are tried, sentenced, and incarcerated as adults.

What happens when the best laid plan goes awry? When sharing your story takes an unexpected turn, determining what to do next can be challenging. You may anticipate your story being published one way but a reporter may place emphasis on another part of your story that you weren’t anticipating. With that being said, it is important to know that the only aspect that you can control, outside of the ground rules that you have laid-out, is what you say and the context you say it in. Once your words have been spoken, it’s out there, that’s it – You cannot take it back!

If someone asks a question that doesn’t pertain to the message that you are trying to deliver, you don’t have to answer it. Or if someone twists what you are trying to say, you don’t have to respond. Doing so can put you in a bind and jeopardize your credibility.

HOW TO AVOID ANSWERING CERTAIN QUESTIONS

- Never say “No Comment”
- Reintroduce the reason why you are there – i.e. “I cannot speak to that question, but I can speak to [fill in the blank].”
- Be honest and tell the truth – i.e. “I’m sorry, but I do not know the answer to that question.”
- Stretching the truth or lying can hurt your credibility and hurt future opportunities to affect change. Maintaining credibility is of the utmost importance when sharing your story.

OVERCOMING NERVOUSNESS

Fear of public speaking is the most common of all phobias. It's a form of performance anxiety in which a person becomes very concerned that he or she will look visibly anxious, maybe even have a panic attack while speaking. Over time, people try to protect themselves by either avoiding public speaking or by struggling against speech anxiety.

It is natural to be nervous before a public appearance. Every professional entertainer experiences some "butterflies" before a performance. The symptoms are usually a nervous stomach, perspiring, shifting eyes, etc. Here is what you can do about.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW – BE PREPARED

- Be prepared
- Organize your thoughts by using an outline or notecards
- Rehearse out loud or in the mirror
- Practice your speech or statements at least 3 times before your performance
- Rest, relaxation and sleep
- Employ positive thinking and envision success

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW – BE READY

- Maximize your nervous energy and utilize it as enthusiasm
- Have a conversation with your audience
- Embrace the opportunity for successful connection
- Know that the audience wants you to succeed
- If you are going to "what if . . .," then consider "what if I am . . . brilliant?"

DO NOT

- Memorize your presentation
- Read your speech verbatim
- Let your nervousness win
- Visualize failure

AFTER THE INTERVIEW – ASSES YOUR ACCOMPLISHMENT

- Take stock of what went well
- Acknowledge areas for improvement and focus
- Understand it is normal if you forgot some or all of what you said
- Listen to and accept compliments
- Consider: What are you most proud of? What do you want to improve for next time?
- Be proud of yourself – delivering a speech is quite an accomplishment

REAL STORIES

TRACY MCCLARD

Tracy McClard is a spokesperson for CFYJ and founder of Youth Justice Awareness month. In this video Tracy shares her powerful story of how she lost her son in the adult criminal justice system.



[Click to play](#)

DWAYNE BETTS

Dwayne Betts is Chairman of CFYJ's Spokesperson Bureau. In this interview Dwayne discusses adolescent brain development and why kids are different and should not be incarcerated with adults at the National Conference of State Legislatures Issue Forum.



[Click to play](#)

NICOLE MIERA

Nicole Miera is a spokesperson for CFYJ. In this interview with Ted Koppel, Nicole shares her powerful story of how she lost her brother in the adult criminal justice system.



[Click to play](#)

WORKSHEET

TIPS FOR TELLING A COMPELLING STORY

DEVELOPING YOUR PERSONAL STORY

Be Personal: This is your story, and should focus on your own life experience, your beliefs, and the changes you hope to see.

Be Specific: The most powerful and memorable stories include specific, real-life examples.

Be Concise: There's no specific limit on the length of your story, but you should try to communicate the essence of your story as clearly and concisely as possible.

Take some time to think about the following questions and how to weave your answers into a sincere and powerful story.

Why is it important for you to advocate for youth in the justice system?

How have you or a loved one been personally impacted?

What is the most important thing you want others to know about youth in the criminal justice system?

IT'S SHOWTIME

1. Your story should matter.

This doesn't mean it has to involve a tragic, extreme, or earth-shattering event. It just means you have to know why it's significant to you. As you're thinking about which stories in your life seem worthy of telling publicly, ask yourself: What changed for me as a result of this incident or moment? What did I learn? What did it mean?

2. Your story should aim for depth rather than breadth.

Talking in detail about one night—or one person or one incident—that was significant in your life is usually more satisfying for an audience than trying to cover a whole year or your whole life. Resist the temptation to try to tell THE story of your life, and instead tell A story about your life. The narrower your focus, the richer tale you'll be able to tell.

3. Your story should be about you.

This doesn't mean that your story shouldn't involve other people. It just means that you are the protagonist of the story; you must be the one who is facing a challenge or taking action. Even if the story seems like it's about your mother or sister or friend, it's really about your relationship with that person. You are the one in front of the audience; you're the one they want to root for. Tell a personal tale.

4. Your story should be honest.

Sure, memory is fragile and flawed, but the intention to be honest must be there. Above all, "Be yourself." Talk the way you talk. Show your personality. The audience response to your authenticity, not to some idea of "the perfect storyteller."

5. Your story should portray your emotional point of view at the time of the events.

This means you want to remember what you were feeling at the time the story's events took place. If you're telling a story about something that happened when you were 11 or 17, take yourself back to that age. What did you understand about the world then? How did the experience feel to you at the time, as opposed to how it feels now?

6. Use specific sensory details that paint a picture.

How did something sound, or smell? When you offer specific, vivid, and authentic details about the people, places, and events in your story, you invite the audience to share your experience fully.

7. The storytelling process should reveal something to you that you didn't see before.

Creating, shaping, and telling your story is a process of discovery. Often, you don't fully understand an event or an incident in your life until you get enough distance from it to view it critically and put it into words. If you really engage in the process, you'll be rewarded with greater insight into things that seemed mysterious or inexplicable at the time. This is one of the great powers of personal storytelling.

PRACTICE SHEET

1. My introduction

Aim for 3-4 sentences. Your name, city and what you currently do.

2. What happened?

Aim for 5-8 sentences. Briefly explain your story and your experience with the criminal justice system.

3. How did it impact me?

Aim for 1-3 sentences. Share how your experience changed you?

5. My point

Aim for 1-3 sentences. Talk about why youth should not be sentenced, tried, or incarcerated with adults.

6. My “ask”

Aim for 1-2 sentences. Let your audience know how they can help.

7. Closing Statement

1-2 sentences. Direct your audience to a resource, event or volunteer opportunity, etc.



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Interested in joining CFYJ's Spokesperson Bureau to share your story? Contact us at info@cfyj.org.

YOUTH JUSTICE

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