

Need to Know Series:

How to Share your Story Safely by Creating Boundaries



Youth In Progress

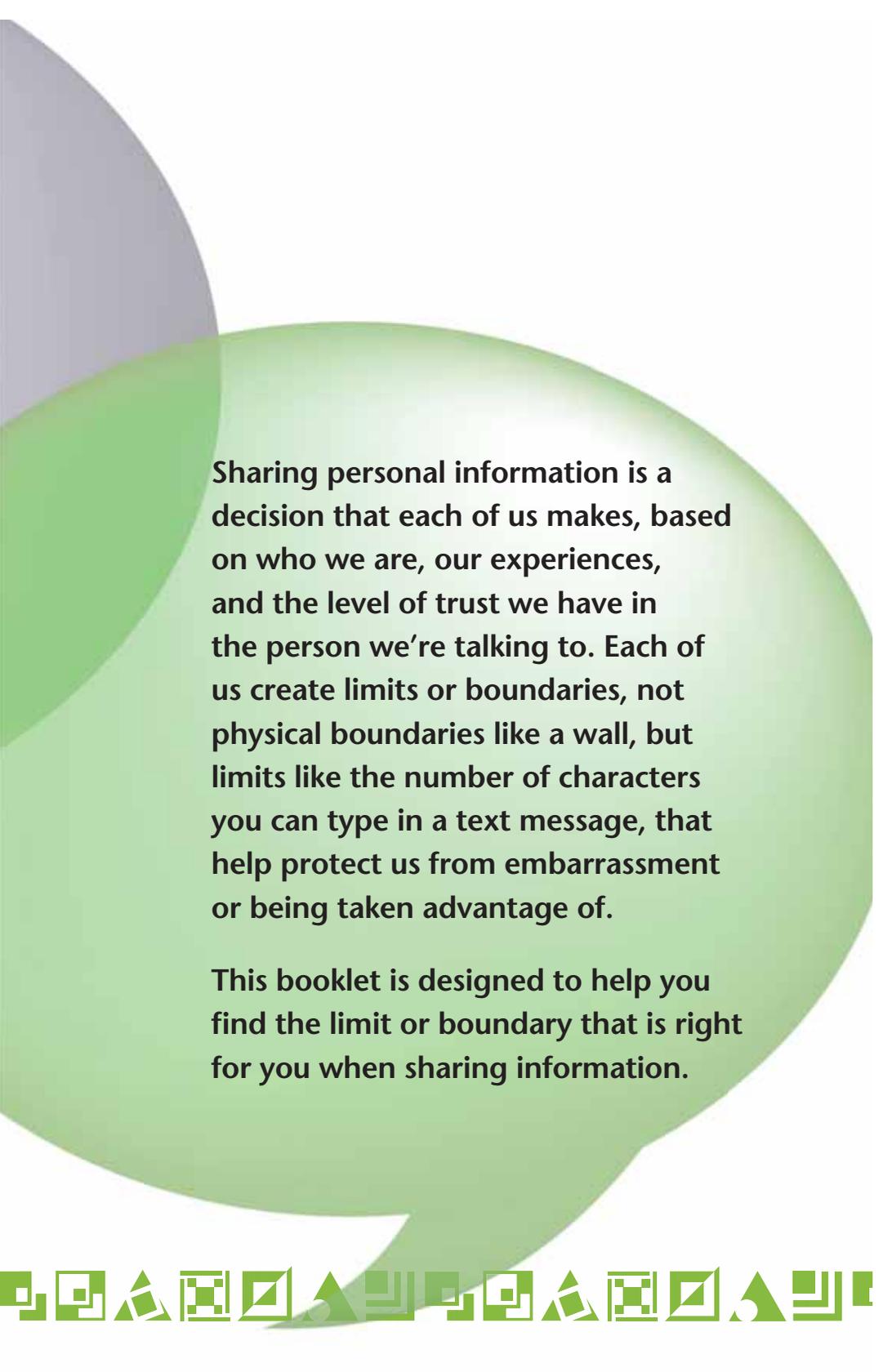
New York State Foster Care
Youth Leadership Advisory Team

// The mission of Youth In Progress is to enhance and advance the lives of today's and tomorrow's youth by supporting their sense of self and responsibility. To do this, we pledge to educate everyone involved in the various systems Youth In Progress members represent to the realities of this experience. //

www.youthinprogress.org

Have you ever been involved in a conversation when the other person revealed too much and you said to yourself...“Oh, my, that is TMI (Too Much Information)?” What makes you feel that way? It could be that the information the other person is sharing with you is too personal, too complicated, way too much, too embarrassing, or it might just be something you wouldn't share.





Sharing personal information is a decision that each of us makes, based on who we are, our experiences, and the level of trust we have in the person we're talking to. Each of us create limits or boundaries, not physical boundaries like a wall, but limits like the number of characters you can type in a text message, that help protect us from embarrassment or being taken advantage of.

This booklet is designed to help you find the limit or boundary that is right for you when sharing information.



You've had many experiences that have shaped who you are. There may be times when you want to share some or all of your story and times when you don't.

There are times when sharing your story can be positive and beneficial. It can help you make sense of and find meaning from the things that you've done or have happened to you. It may help you change the way you see things or think about things, or even help you see new possibilities or opportunities. You can use your story to inform caseworkers, direct care staff, foster parents, teachers, counselors, and your attorney, to help them better understand you and what you need. You can also tell your story to other youth in care to help them connect to someone who has had similar experiences.

Sharing your story does have risks, and can make you feel vulnerable or make those listening uncomfortable, but it can also inspire and motivate others.



Creating Boundaries (Limits):

It is important for you to make decisions about what you want to share, with whom, and when, and to think about whether you want this person or people to know your story or even part of your story. Establishing boundaries or limits to identify what you are comfortable sharing ahead of time is important and can help you feel more self-assured about how you want to be treated by others. For example, you can politely decline to answer personal questions by saying something like, "I'm not really comfortable answering that." Knowing what you are willing to share will help you to prepare, feel more confident, and respond in a way that keeps you safe.



What Are the Types of Boundaries You Can Set?

There are three main types of boundaries you can create to share information safely.

 **Physical Boundaries:** These can be as simple as how you feel about physical touch (proximity when talking with someone, handshake, hug), or how you spend time with someone (where, how long, what to do or not do). Setting physical boundaries can also mean being comfortable when you share personal information. It's important to think about and plan for where you sit, stand, or what you need to be comfortable. It is essential for you to understand and develop your own physical comfort zones before speaking with others in day-to-day life, or sharing in a formal way, such as talking to a judge or your attorney.

 **Emotional Boundaries:** The most important boundary to establish may be your emotional boundary. Establishing an emotional boundary is like putting up an invisible shield of protection. Telling your story might be difficult for you, so be aware of your own emotional limits. If you know that talking about a certain subject is difficult for you or will make you emotional, be prepared for it and set guidelines for yourself. Think about having a supportive person with you, someone you trust who can



help you through it, or plan to take a break. You may choose to avoid certain subjects. Some subjects may be too painful, too personal, too complicated, too embarrassing, or will create an embarrassing emotional response within you. The limits you set will depend on the subjects you choose to share, who you talk to, the level of trust you have that the other person(s) will treat your story with respect, and whether the information will help you or help the other person(s).

 **Social Network Boundaries:** Setting limits for social network sites means that before you use the Internet, or use sites like Facebook or Twitter, you think about what information you will or will not share and set clear boundaries. Use caution when posting photos, comments, or links on your social networking sites because what you share will be “out there” forever and could affect future employment, housing or educational opportunities. Also, remember that information posted to social networking sites is posted immediately, it goes out worldwide, and it is traceable. The same limits you apply to social network sites should apply to your cell phone, including instant messages, text messaging, and e-mail.



“Green Information” is generally safe and can be used when talking to anyone from strangers to close friends or family. An example of green sharing is: “My parents were unable to care for me.”

“Yellow Information” is not as safe as green and should be used only when talking to friends or trusted acquaintances. An example of yellow sharing is: “I came into care because of my mother’s mental health needs, and I can’t live with my father.”

“Red Information” is the least safe, most private information. Caution and good judgment should be used when sharing your story with others who are not trusted professionals, friends, or family. An example of red sharing would be sharing full details of why you are in care or specific examples about what occurred.

Some youth in care decide to share their stories publicly to help educate the public, to advocate for youth rights and policy change. If this is something you choose to do, the same limits you set about sharing your story can be applied to any public speaking you do to educate, influence, inspire, or make a difference.



How Do I Prepare to Share?

Once you are familiar with the different levels of sharing, ask yourself the following questions to help prepare what you want to share. This will help you determine the appropriate level of information to share when speaking with others.

Who am I talking to? Do I know this person or group of people? Is this a professional or personal relationship?

-  Peer, teacher, caseworker, judge, or lots of people at a conference?

What is my message?

-  What is the purpose or why am I sharing this information?
-  How much do I want to share and what do I want to keep private?

What is the purpose of sharing my story?

-  To help others understand what youth in care need?
-  To motivate professionals to improve policy?
-  To inspire peers to achieve their goals despite challenges?
-  To help my caseworker, parent, foster parent, direct care worker, or other professionals meet my needs and/or support my goals?



Remember, there are two parts to every conversation:

- 🌀 What you say
- 🌀 What is heard by the listener(s)

Keep in mind that when you share the meaning and significance your experience has for you, it helps your listeners avoid interpreting your message any other way. Explain “why” you want to share. That can help focus your message. Examples of effectively doing this are:

- 🌀 “It’s difficult to talk about this because I will always feel sad about what happened. I’m sharing it with you, though, because I believe it’s important to understand...”
- 🌀 “I know that some of my experiences have helped me to learn and grow. I’m sharing this information because I want to help others...”



Which Supportive Adults Can I Trust With My Personal Story?

It is important to talk to your caseworker, social worker, physician, attorney, foster parent or direct care staff, and your parent or guardian about what you need and how they can help you. It is important for you to be open and honest with all of these individuals for them to provide you with the support, resources, and services you need.

There is one exception: when you talk about abuse that has happened or is happening to you, or doing harm to yourself or others, your caseworker, social worker, physician, attorney and direct care staff have an obligation to support your safety and the safety of others. They are required to share that information.



Who Can Help You Set Safe Boundaries?

Your caseworker or a supportive adult can help you set appropriate boundaries. They can help you develop the skills, attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge necessary to be an effective communicator while maintaining your safety. They can help you prepare by working with you to identify what things you are comfortable sharing with others. They can help you practice your responses by role-playing with you: by playing the part of a person listening to you and asking you questions.

Understanding that you have control of what you say, how you say it, to whom you say it, and when is important. Remember that once you share something, you cannot take it back. Decide for yourself what you want to share about your life with others before a situation or question arises. Setting personal boundaries can help you keep things private until you decide the time is right to share. Think of the traffic light to help you decide if it is a green, yellow, or red situation. If you need help, ask someone you trust. Your voice is powerful, and knowing how to use it can be empowering for you and others.



How Do I Respond to People Who Ask Questions That Make Me Uncomfortable?

There are a couple of different ways you could respond to questions that make you feel uncomfortable. Remember to consider who's asking the question, the level of trust you have that your answer will be respected and kept confidential, and how the answer might help the person, or help the person help you.

What are some examples of how I can politely respond to people who ask me why I am in foster care?

To family or a friend you hang out with:



I don't want to go into all the details, but it's a good place for me to be for a while. My family and I have some things to work out. It's not forever.



We've known each other for a while, and I trust you to keep this between you and me. I live with the Clooneys now because my mom is getting help for drinking. She'll be better soon and we'll be a family again.



To a peer or acquaintance (another classmate or foster child):

-  To a classmate: This is not something I want to talk about now. I'm in foster care because I have to be.
-  To another foster child: I needed someplace safe to go. I've been here for about (six months). I don't mind being here.

To a stranger (someone you meet at the mall, on a social networking site, or someone you meet on the bus):

-  I don't feel comfortable discussing my situation.



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