



strategic sharing

Telling your story in a way that is meaningful, effective, and safe.





Casey Family Programs' mission is to provide and improve—and ultimately to prevent the need for—foster care. Established by UPS founder Jim Casey in 1966, the foundation provides direct services and promotes advances in child welfare practice and policy.



Foster Care Alumni of America connects alumni of foster care to one another as an extended family community. Together and with our allies, FCAA transforms foster care practice and policy, ensuring opportunity for people in and from foster care. For more information about FCAA, visit www.FosterCareAlumni.org or call 703.299.6767. Please join FCAA today.

Practice your strategic sharing skills!

Learn how to create and share personal stories in a safe and supportive environment through our interactive workshop —Strategic Sharing. For more information about scheduling a workshop, please contact asktau@casey.org.

Strategic sharing

Telling your stories in a way that is meaningful, effective, and safe.

Ideally, sharing personal experiences educates, influences, inspires, and makes a difference. At its worst, it can feel manipulative or exploitative and lead to harmful consequences. It's about making good choices about how we tell our life stories so that our voices can be heard, our message is effective, and our well-being is protected. Strategic sharing is meaningful, respectful, and safe.

Opportunities to tell our stories

If you are involved in foster care, you have probably heard stories from people's personal experiences. You may have opportunities to share your life story with others in order to educate and influence them. Whether you are a person in or from foster care, a care provider, a professional or interested community member, you've lived a story of your own.

Stories from personal experience are an important way to understand, and do our work. Consider the following examples of the ways that life stories are incorporated into work within the foster care system:

- Training staff and foster parents, public education, advocacy, and lobbying are all more effective when we include life stories as a way to know and understand what people in and from foster care need. It also helps us understand the challenges faced by consumers and providers of foster care, identify the best that foster care has to offer, how to do more of that, and appreciate the great strength and resilience of people connected to the foster care system.
- Accrediting bodies, such as the Council on Accreditation for Children and Family Services, include standards for client and family involvement in service delivery. When we involve the people who are the consumers of services, we must be willing to listen to their life stories and the perspective and expertise that they contain.
- Funding sources, including government grantors, require more client participation and collaboration in program planning and evaluation. Again, this participation will often involve sharing life stories.
- Life stories play a large role in fund development—both our success stories from within the system and donor stories about why they are motivated to give.
- Life stories are effective in recruiting, orienting, and training volunteers and other partners, including board members, foster/adoptive/kinship families, and community members.



This booklet is for ...

This booklet is a resource for people involved in foster care who want to share from their own personal experience or who 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 personal experiences.

Reasons to share

Everyone involved in foster care has stories to tell. We've all learned from our own experiences and others' experiences. Whether you are a foster youth, alumnus of care, practitioner, administrator, volunteer, other involved staff or community member—or several of the above—you have stories to share!

Telling each other about our experiences is one of the primary ways that we communicate and learn. When we share our life stories with each other, we make meaning out of our experiences. We can reflect on the meaning of people's life stories to understand each other and to learn how best to work together. Sharing our experiences with each other is effective because:

- Stories are memorable and compelling; they put a human face on issues, needs, and problems, and they motivate and inspire us to action.
- Sharing our life stories helps us to make sense and meaning out of our own and others' experiences.
- Sharing our stories can help change the stereotypes and assumptions related to foster care, reducing the stigma associated with having lived or worked in the system.
- Stories engage our imagination and help us see new possibilities and opportunities.
- Sharing our stories is how we build relationships, how we decrease the isolation that so many of us have felt, and how we establish a supportive community together.
- Sharing and reflecting on our life stories can lead to growth and change in our own lives and the lives of others.
- Stories influence culture, public opinion, and policy.
- Stories help us learn about and understand people's cultural identities.

Risks of sharing

Talking about our personal experiences carries some risks. Sharing can make us vulnerable and can make our listeners uncomfortable.

Self-disclosure is a lot like clothing. We dress to be comfortable with ourselves and around other people. We dress to present ourselves a certain way, and we usually are more comfortable when we're dressed for the occasion—meaning that we fit in with the way everyone else is dressed. If we dress differently from others, we want that to be our choice. Have you ever had the experience of arriving dressed up at an event you thought was formal only to find everyone else in shorts and jeans, or the other way around?

Likewise, we share information in order to present ourselves to fit in comfortably with other people. We're usually most comfortable when the level of self-disclosure is balanced. Sometimes when we share to educate, inform, and influence, the self-disclosure is not balanced and it can feel like showing up wearing the wrong clothes.

Take the example of a social worker speaking on a panel to advocate for system reform and revealing that she was placed in foster care as a child. When her listeners hear that she was in foster care, right away they may conclude that she was abused, neglected, delinquent, abandoned, or orphaned. People knowing this about you and your family can feel like being naked in a room full of clothed people.

Here are some of the other reasons people give about why sharing personal information can sometimes be uncomfortable:

- Sometimes we experience **“sharing remorse”** afterward. You may wish you hadn't said so much, or you worry what people think of you now. You may feel like you were duped into sharing more than you meant to because it felt good to have someone listen. But then afterwards you wonder if people will react negatively—and sometimes they do.
- Bringing up certain **memories can be painful**. Listeners may be concerned that going into personal history will be traumatic, or bring up unresolved personal issues—especially if we display any emotion as we share.
- Some listeners will decide that we're **not credible** when we share “too much” information or certain kinds of information. Some people don't value stories, preferring “hard” facts and data. Some dismiss individual experiences as atypical and incomplete. Some are uncomfortable with self-disclosure and emotion. Some won't think that you fit into their idea of who an expert is. People's judgments about your credibility can affect your working relationships and opportunities.
- Each one of us wants to be respected and to be recognized for all of the knowledge, education, and experience that we bring. If you share personal information, you risk being **labeled and put in a box**, viewed as a “case” or “client,” or considered “too emotional.” People may make assumptions that you have “issues” and can't be objective or professional. What we share may reveal our membership in group that has a stigma attached to it in our society.
- What we share can **affect our personal relationships**. Usually other people appear in our life stories. These people may not wish to be identified when you share. In some situations, we are ethically bound to preserve confidentiality. People in your life may disagree with what you share or how you present it. If you still have a relationship with any of these people, sharing an experience that involves them might affect the relationship.
- Sometimes people **only want to hear what they want to hear**, rather than the whole story. Our listeners may want the uplifting success story with a happy ending to receive validation for their efforts or financial support. They may find it hard to hear an authentic, complete telling of our stories that include some negative aspects.

Do these concerns mean that we should never share from our experiences? Not at all. Remember, sharing can be memorable, compelling, inspirational, and motivating. Telling our life stories is the way we build community and make meaning of our world. These are some powerful reasons to bring all of who we are to the table when we seek to educate and influence!

Concerns are also important and real. A way to minimize these risks is to be strategic so that our sharing is constructive and effective. We can make choices that increase our credibility and reduce our vulnerability. When we do that, it's less like drawing attention because we're without clothes and more like drawing attention because we're spectacularly dressed in unique and perfect clothes of our own choosing. Have you ever had the feeling of showing up somewhere dressed in your favorite clothes and knowing you looked great? That's what we try to achieve with strategic sharing.

Being strategic

Three strategies will help you be effective and safe when you share: *Choose*, *Connect*, and *Claim*.

Choose

Keep in mind that you have the power to choose what you share. The first choice to make is your purpose for sharing. What do you hope to accomplish by sharing a part of your life story? What do you hope your audience's response will be? What do you want them to learn? What action do you want them to take?

Next, choose what you are willing to share. Think about and decide how much you are willing to share and what you will keep private. Remember that you are not obligated to share your story. If you don't feel comfortable disclosing personal information or experiences, don't!

Also think about and choose what details you want to provide in your life story. A few carefully placed details can make a story come alive. It is also possible to convey a compelling story by stating key events and describing situations briefly and simply. Choose the details that will make your story memorable and compelling and still maintain your privacy.

Thinking through these choices will help you establish healthy boundaries about your sharing, which is key to being effective and safe. You can always ask yourself: "Why am I sharing this information?" and "Who benefits from me sharing this information?" to help decide whether your sharing is strategic and appropriate. As you decide where to establish boundaries, consider working through your story with a trusted colleague, friend, mentor, or counselor.

Connect

Once you've chosen your purpose and what you are willing to share, the second strategy is to plan how you will connect your sharing with your audience and your purpose.

Consider your audience, why you are there together, and what your audience expects. Learn as much as you can about your audience in advance and ask yourself; is your sharing appropriate for the audience, event, time, and place? Are they likely to be responsive to your story? What do you have in common with your audience?

Prepared with this knowledge, you can plan how to connect your sharing with your purpose. How does your personal experience relate to the issue or topic being addressed? How does your experience compare with what your audience knows about the issue or topic? What do you want your audience to do with the information you've shared with them?

Being knowledgeable about your audience and the issues will help you gain and keep credibility. It also shows respect for your audience. Your audience is less likely to feel manipulated if you demonstrate your knowledge of the audience and the values and issues you share in common.

Claim

The third strategy in being strategic is to claim your own experiences. Sharing is strategic when you name and claim your own story, the emotions it generates, and the process of sharing itself. Doing this can put your audience at ease about your self-disclosure. They'll see that you have taken ownership of your life story and your choices about sharing and will find it easier to listen. Here are some ways to do this:

- Interpret your own experiences by naming the meaning and significance your experience has for you. Don't wait for others to interpret—and possibly misinterpret—your life story for you.
- If your emotions become obvious as you are sharing, name your emotion and connect it to your purpose for sharing. For example, you could say something like: "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 ..." and then continue with a statement of your purpose.
- It can also be strategic to name and take ownership of what's going on in the process of sharing. One example of doing this is to say: "I know that some of you may think that I'm sharing too much. The reason I'm sharing this information is because ..." and then go on to name your interpretation of your experience and connect it to your purpose for sharing.
- Keep your power to interpret your own experiences. Claim for yourself the meaning of your story, your choices in sharing, and what's going on in the process.

Three strategies

Choose ...

- Your purpose
- What you will share
- The details

Connect with your ...

- Audience
- Purpose

Claim the ...

- Meaning and significance
- Emotion
- Process of sharing

Asking others to share

You may be in a position to invite people to share their experiences. You may do this in your role as an educator, advocate, facilitator, community organizer, local leader, or mentor. When you invite someone to share their life story, consider the following ways to do this respectfully:

- Be up-front about why you are inviting someone to share their experiences. Share your purpose and your agenda.
- Provide time and space for the person to think about, reflect on, and prepare his story. Sometimes sharing comes easily and sometimes it takes time.
- Respect the integrity and authenticity of someone's life story. When you ask someone to share, don't ask for a predetermined story. For example: "Will you please tell us about how happy you were to be placed with your foster parents and what a difference they made in your life?" A better approach is to share your purpose for inviting someone's story, listen respectfully to the story and to the person's own way of sharing. In advance, work with the person to determine whether your purposes are compatible and if sharing would be appropriate for this setting.
- Be sure that you aren't asking the person to harm their integrity, clean up, edit, or distort their life story in a way that damages the authenticity of the sharing.
- Encourage the person to reflect on, claim, and interpret their own experiences. Don't interpret and retell a story for the person. Think twice before you start a sentence like: "What he's saying is ... "
- Provide full disclosure about how a life story will be used. Will it be written down anywhere, recorded, or repeated? Are the media likely to be in attendance? Or people in authority?
- Respect the person's privacy. If you suggest adding details, be sure it is because the story needs clarification or will be stronger for it. Don't ask questions just to satisfy curiosity.
- Whenever possible, balance self-disclosure by inviting audience members to introduce themselves and share from their own experience. Model strategic sharing with a story of your own. Remember that we all have a life story—not just clients and former clients.
- Remember to say "thank you", and to provide the same kind of recognition for the expertise of a person sharing her story as you do for other "experts".



Responding to questions

Some of the best learning happens when people have an opportunity to ask questions and be part of a conversation. Sometimes, though, questions or comments about what you share will feel inappropriate or uncomfortable. Here are some possible responses:

- Restate your purpose and move on. “Thanks for your comments. There’s so much we could talk about. Let’s focus our attention on our purpose for gathering today, which is ... ”
- Open the question up to the entire group. “Great question. Let’s see what others have to say on this issue. Who would like to respond?”
- Generalize the question to the larger issue. For example, if someone asks about your family’s substance abuse, you might respond: “Many young people who are homeless come from families struggling with drug and alcohol abuse, and we’ve learned that we can better support these families by ... ”
- It’s always an option to decline to answer. “That’s something I’d prefer not to discuss,” or, “That’s something I’ll keep private. Thanks for understanding. Next question?”
- Depending on the situation, you may want to talk about the reasons that you find the question uncomfortable.

Establishing and maximizing your credibility

In order to more effectively influence the thinking, practices, and policies in the foster care system, audiences must perceive us as credible. There are a number of things you should keep in mind about credibility:

- Credibility is a judgment we make about how willing we are to listen to, or believe, another person.
- Credibility is an attitude a listener holds toward a speaker.
- Credibility is assigned by the listener—which is why it is possible that you can have credibility with some listeners, and not much with others.
- Credibility is not an assumed characteristic or quality that you do or do not have—it is rather the perception of your listener.
- Assumptions held by your listeners include some dimensions you can’t fully control. People will assign more credibility to a specific gender, educational achievements, particular ethnicities and certain age groups.

Since credibility is something assigned by your audience, it’s important to understand some ways you can influence that credibility:

- You can understand what tends to attract greater judgments of credibility and adjust your communication accordingly.
- You can ally yourself with other people that your audience finds highly credible. Whoever you are, the chances are good that you will be more credible working together than if you are working alone.
- You can prepare yourself to communicate with as many credible qualities as possible. These qualities shown in research include:
 - Trustworthiness
 - Competence
 - Composure and poise
 - Consistency of verbal and nonverbal messages
 - Likability and sociability
 - A well-prepared and organized presentation
 - Well-supported arguments
 - Allies that your audience finds credible

Double Bind—When What Makes You Credible Also Takes Away Your Credibility

The very thing that causes some people to assign credibility to you may often be the same thing that can diminish your credibility in other peoples' eyes.

As one alumna of foster care put it, “Our credibility comes from the fact that we grew up in care ... and our credibility is questioned because we grew up in care!”

Whatever your role in the foster care system—professional, foster or kinship care parent, interested community member, youth, or alumnus—you will encounter listeners who will give or withhold the assumption of credibility to you based on that status.





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