

Engaging Youth In Foster Care

Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Sixto Cancel, CEO, Think Of Us, Child Welfare Capacity Building Center for States Youth Consultant

Female Speaker [00:00:00]: This is the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, a place for those who care about strengthening families and protecting children. You'll hear about the innovations, emerging trends, and success stories across child welfare, direct from those striving to make a difference. This is your place for new ideas and information, to support your work to improve the lives of children, youth, and families.

Tom Oates [00:00:31]: And welcome to this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast. And this is a new endeavor from Child Welfare Information Gateway which is the nationwide information service of the Children's Bureau, under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. You can access Information Gateway at childwelfare.gov and we've launched this podcast to provide the nation's child welfare professionals, those who interact with child welfare and those concerned with child welfare with insights and perspective on the new innovations, the emerging trends, evidence based practices and frankly what's worth sharing to help you enhance the work you're doing to serve children, youth, and families.

My name is Tom Oates and I along with a host of talented others work for Information Gateway to connect you to the vetted, peer reviewed, relevant information, resources, data and more surrounding all aspects of the child welfare field. And we hope these podcasts provide you a quick and easy way to learn a little bit more. We know how busy you are and how important your job is.

So we're really excited about today's show because we want to make sure that you're getting insight and lessons that can help immediately in the work you do in supporting staff and coworkers or the families and children that you're working with every day. So today it's getting the perspective from youth in foster care. So we talked with Sixto Cancel. And besides having a name worthy of being a super hero or private detective, Sixto is a foster care alumnus who serves as a youth consultant to the Children's Bureau's Child welfare Capacity Building Center for States.

Now besides that he's developed youth engagement programs for foster youth. He's served on numerous foster care and adoption advisory boards. He coaches college students on advocacy efforts within the foster care system plus he's the founder of Think of Us, a group supporting foster youth in making their own decisions around their life, work, education, and health. We got into a great discussion about how professionals can safely and effectively use social media, specifically Facebook, as a support tool for the youth they serve, how they can meet them at their level to spark more engagement and buy in with their cases. And also how to help youth establish relationships with supportive adults. Sixto really speaks from the heart but also with great clarity and a passion to see foster youth and foster alumni find and build the foundation that they need for the rest of their lives and it's a great tools for those professionals who work and support the foster care youth. So with that, no more delays. Here's the conversation with Sixto Cancel. [MUSIC] Sixto Cancel, welcome to the podcast.

Sixto Cancel [00:03:13]: Well thank you for having me here Tom.

Tom Oates [00:03:14]: I appreciate you taking the time. Here it's another challenge for the social workers, especially when they've got a ton of caseloads and frankly when you're dealing with youth who frankly start to build their own independence. And start to think of their lives as something that they've finally got a little bit of control of. Getting that engagement can be a challenge so where is that we're seeing success because we always talk about the difficulties. Where are we seeing success in getting that buy in, that partnership to build skills when we're seeing that partnership between professionals and youth in foster care?

Sixto Cancel [00:04:12]: You know, I definitely think of Bridgeport, Connecticut. In Bridgeport, Connecticut you have the department of children and families using Facebook in a very safe, structured way to engage with young people not only to be Facebook friends with young people, from the social worker to the young person, but to also relate very important information of when is the next asset training, delivering content around being prepared for your case plan meetings and so on.

So I've seen that type of engagement and I'm in awe of that. One, that young people wanted to connect with their social workers and that they wanted to, even that if that social worker was no longer their primary worker, right? And that two, that they were connecting with each other too on Facebook, young people were connecting with each other on Facebook and providing support to each other via Facebook. And so they've really been able to reach us where we're at. So an example is you know, there was a couple weeks where you know I was in college and I, my social worker was trying to get a hold of me but she was able to still see that there were great things happening and how involved I was.

And then she was also able to see things like hey listen, I've seen that you haven't posted in a while and that's not what she would say but I realize that when I haven't posted in a while that she would check in via phone, that she would see what's going on. So it really was a tool that allowed my social worker also to consider different opportunities for me. So she started to really understand what were some of the things I liked that maybe didn't come up in our monthly one to one meeting and she can bring those things out of me, she can see those things because she was also a Facebook friend.

Tom Oates [00:05:46]: So you're not averse to maybe talking about communicating via social media, but at least getting kind of a check in or a monitoring tool because it, we're all, we all at times can be different people to different groups that were around so who you may be in that one on one meeting may be different than who you are with your friends or who you are at work. But you're saying that the social worker can kind of get, a glance at all those different aspects and maybe get a clearer picture.

Sixto Cancel [00:06:15]: Absolutely so here, you know I wouldn't consider it a monitoring tool or a tool to like check in but what Facebook is meant to, it's meant to connect people and it's meant to authentically create a space for every individual to be able to express their ideas, to be able to express some of the things that they want to and so being friends not only with my social worker but several social workers in the office allowed us to build this online space, this online community between not only me and the social worker but me and some of the other young people who are in care. And that allowed us to you know participate in youth force, participate in financial literacy asset trainings.

Actually build an identity in the community around the foster care system. Too many times you know we stigmatize the foster care system as something that is negative and there's a lot of problems and a lot of improvements to be made but I think it's a beautiful thing when a group of people who have had some similar adversities come together and are able to identify as almost just one culture that's part of the many things that are part of them.

Tom Oates [00:07:24]: So how important is that when you're dealing with youth, or even with the social workers to deal with each other, to have that opportunity because I guess you know the forum to share and the forum to feel a part of community is a challenge for really all involved. And are you seeing that? Talk to me about how they can foster that and excuse the pun but talk to me about how you can get a young person involved to let them know that this is actually a safe place to do something like that.

Sixto Cancel [00:07:54]: You know I think it organically happens, right? So when you're dealing with a tool like Facebook or Instagram, these are tools that are meant to connect people and to share ideas and so as long as you provide the invite for that to happen then you're essentially providing the space for it to happen. I think the other thing is that you know when you come into foster care you know you've experienced some type of trauma. And there's trauma in just being removed or being placed somewhere else, right? So there are things that are lost in that process. Your voice and your choice are lost, being informed of what's going on are lost. And so when you get to get with another group of people who all have that similar experience and all are saying well this is how you navigate it, this is what I'm doing to get through this, this is what's working for me. It creates this sense of what is possible. And I think sometimes you know we focus so much on what are the services that are needed. Oh, you need X because you're doing X. X needs to happen because you know, something has happened at home. And sometimes we can you know feel very deficient. There's a lot of deficit that we can experience and so to have a community and to have this space where you can connect to other young people, you can connect to your workers, you can connect to other people in general. It starts to normalize the experience of being an adolescent, being someone who is connected.

Tom Oates [00:09:20]: When you advise folks, like in this example in Bridgeport, Connecticut, when you advise folks about you know how to use something like Facebook there's going to be a lot of regulations that a social worker or an agency or county or state may have on somebody so how do you navigate you know, what are the do's and don'ts when it comes to dealing with things like privacy or like dealing with really what it is, is sharing and where is those kind of legal eggshells that you kind of need to walk around on?

Sixto Cancel [00:09:51]: So when it comes down to privacy I think you know we always, sometimes we may use privacy as a barrier to cover ourselves. You know, when it just may take a little bit of extra work to figure out how to do this in a safe way. So let's take Facebook for example. So the social worker should be creating a unique, private, unsearchable profile that they can add other young people who are on their case load to. It should be the young person's decision whether they want to accept or deny the social worker. Secondly there are privacy features on Facebook that allow you to protect yourself and to protect the young people that you are connected to on Facebook. Some of the examples are one, not allowing your own profile to be searched, two, another example not demonstrating who are your friends. Because if you're adding all of your young people on your case load, you may not want the other young people to see who also is on your case load or who else is connected to you. So you can actually click the option to not show who your friends are. This allows you to really be able to as a social worker be able to have a page that protects everyone's privacy. But I think the main point Tom is that there is a way to do it, counties are doing it, systems are doing it. But we cannot, it takes a little bit of work and we cannot hide behind the excuse of privacy or legal issues even though it is a real concern. We have to just do a little bit more due diligence and work to figure out how can it be done.

Tom Oates [00:11:27]: So with that, and obviously we're creating the format and I like what you mentioned earlier before about meeting the youth where they are. Because at that point, we get to a point where we are independent and we are self-thinking and so if things are not given that kind of why do I care sense? Or you know fit me where I am so you understand me a little bit more. And you bring up that we had some earlier conversations about you know that partnership between professionals and youth, and when they do meet together how those professionals, those social workers can kind of help build those behaviors and skills where a lot of times those young people may have not had that opportunity. So if we got something from social media man and you start to get that meeting folks where they are, it gives - it sounds like to me - you're getting those tools that a professional would need to maybe engage those young people a little bit better. So when they're in the one on one setting, we're in the face to face setting, a lot of times we're focused on the day to day. But when it comes to learning a little bit more about really engaging and preparing that young person for the future as they transition to adulthood, where is the opportunity for the social worker to help that young person build those long term, life sustaining behavioral skills that they'll need to cope with when they get you know beyond school when they get beyond their teen years?

Sixto Cancel [00:12:56]: Yeah, absolutely, I think you know one of the beauties of social media is that it provides an insight to what is, what are the decisions that we're making every single day? So from the decision of posting something to the decision of what we get involved in and how that shows up on our social media. And so when I think of a social worker, I think that you know, if you think about all the stuff that young people will post you probably will have a heart attack. Because they're showing things you're like why in the world would you post that? Why would you do that, right? Did you forget that I was on your Facebook page? But it's such a great opportunity to have different learning moments throughout the course of that young person being on your caseload.

I think to myself of one young person who you know just used a lot of profanity and went back and forth, yet this person was very interested in politics right? So we were able to have a conversation after and talk a little bit about you know being a leader and being involved in politics required that you know you were very careful what you said in public spaces. And I don't think we would have ever been able to have that conversation if we didn't have concrete examples to go back to and say well listen you know, I've seen some things that alerted me but I think the power of that was the fact that it came from a peer. So even though the social worker you know at the meeting was like hey, we should all be careful about what we post on social media, the social worker didn't go up to any of the young people and say that, they allow each other, they form the space for us to talk to each other about what's appropriate, right? And what are some of those consequences and those effects, and I think the one thing that happens to young people when they're in the system because there's a lot of restrictions they don't get those same developmental opportunities that other teenagers have without the restrictions that we have.

Therefore there's less opportunities to practice with money, there's less opportunities to practice decision making with being on the Internet. There's less opportunities to practice decision making period. And that's the one skill that we really do need to be practicing over and over and over because when we are on our own, whether that's 18, 21, or 23, or so on that the factors that we need to have really good decision making skills because we don't have that safety net that other young people do have.

Tom Oates [00:15:13]: So there's the opportunity and I'm going to kind of like foreshadow a little bit from a conversation we had earlier, about the term supportive adults. And helping the young person

find those around them that can help them exactly with those skills that you talked about that are so vital moving forward and having a positive adult relationship that's not always going to be based on their care. Or someone going through foster care but actually having that along the way. Because again the social worker can't do it all, yet the young person needs to understand where they can go get those skills and where they can rely. So we talked about, you talked supportive adults, I'm going to ask you two things. One, explain what a supportive adult is and two, how the social worker can help the young person both identify and kind of grow that relationship with a supportive adult.

Sixto Cancel [00:16:13]: So I can up with this term youth identified supportive adult, YISA, right, Y-I-S_A. And the reason why I came up with this was because I realized when I look back at my childhood right, so I entered care at 11 months. Then at the age of 6 I was placed back with my biological mother then at the age of 7 reentered foster care until I was adopted at the age of 9 by a really racist and abusive situation and then found myself couch surfing between 13 to 15. Reentered foster care, turned around, went to three different homes, and then finally went to college and been living on my own since. But when I look at who were the youth identified, who were the adults that I considered supportive, there were about 15 different adults who took active roles from 6th grade all the way until I went to college, right? And out of those 15 there were 6 adults who were viable placements for me. But they were never identified because they were in my personal network.

So I think that the system misses an opportunity to actually place us with the adults that we're already connected to, that we're all building relationships to right. That we don't look deeply enough to see who is supporting this young person already? And it's almost a concept of family finding with supportive adult finding. Who are the adults who are in this young person's life so to me, right, I think that you know social workers, when they are present to a young a person when they are meeting that young person's need. But they're doing extraordinary work, when they can connect with the adults that the young person admires, that the young person honors, that the young person listens to, that the young person wants to be connected to. And that those adults are fit and healthy and willing to be in that child's life then when they support that supportive adult in supporting the young person. And creating that, and creating tools and providing resources to make that bond stronger then what you're doing is you're setting a network for that child to be embedded in, for that young person to be embedded in beyond just the system and services time of that young person's life.

Tom Oates [00:18:17]: So with that once you can kind of look around and see who's there, what can a young person do because you could easily be apprehensive to think does somebody really want to be a part of my life or not or they're just a coach or it's just a teacher, you know they got their own lives. So how can then that social worker encourage or give that young person the tools to kind of grow into that relationship or to see if that relationship can turn into a real supportive adult or a YISA as you mentioned?

Sixto Cancel [00:18:47]: Absolutely. So I think about it this way, if you ask a young person identify the supportive adults in your life, identify people who you can live with or identify who cares about you, you're immediately going to get that blank face and like, if you were asking me that I would have been like what the hell are you talking about, right? But when you ask a young person hey, can you list off the top three or five adults who can help you review your resume? Can you list off two people who will give you a ride? Can you list off three people who will go buy this t-shirt for you right now, right? That's such a tangible thing that you're going to get names. And that's where you start the work. Okay, so this young person identified these people, let's figure out how we can reach out to these folks, these adults to be more included in the young person's life. And it's a lot of engagement. It's not like today we're going to

you know engage this young person supportive adult and then tomorrow we're moving that young person in there. This is just like any other relationship, there are these humps, there are these ups, there are these downs and how you foster that relationship is critical.

Tom Oates [00:19:50]: I'm going to give you the opportunity here to go back to those years when you were in care and think to the social workers and if there's the one thing that they would want to know or should know from the youth perspective about dealing with the youth, engaging with them, what they may not assume that they should assume. And if you could go back from that former self and tell those social workers something that would probably help them with the relationship engaging with you, what would it be?

Sixto Cancel [00:20:22]: You know it would definitely be that you know their sense of urgency is different from my sense of urgency. And so the reality that you know I lived in and that was placed in and many other people have lived in, you know what we're experiencing in the moment is that disconnection sometimes from adults. What we're experiencing in in that moment is not belonging to that family. And so even though the social worker is looking at you know, you're in a safe place, this is a good family, they're not abusing you. There's so much more that goes into the quality of life and living. Not just being able to get up and go day to day, but actually being able to wake up and live every day and enjoy living that you have to just think about the young person's urgency. So think of moments like you know, one of the connections I wanted to have was with my older brother. And my older brother lived in Puerto Rico, I lived in Connecticut. And so logistically that was really tough for the social worker and so at that time there were certain social workers who would avoid trying to go there and have that conversation because it was just a lot of work. Unfortunately my brother you know, passed away due to gun violence after. And so because the whole issue with my, with some of the social workers I had, I didn't get the opportunity to really engage with my older brother the way I would have wanted to.

And so sometimes we think to ourselves that we have a lifetime, that this young person needs to think about therapy, this young person needs to think about their grades. Like there's all these other things, but you just don't know you know, when you'll have the next opportunity and sometimes I do believe that because there's so much fire to put out in the system that the system will take it for granted that we don't need to do that part right now. But we don't know when the next time that opportunity may happen.

Tom Oates [00:22:10]: So what do you do to make sure the two things, one to take advantage of today, the opportunity as you mentioned but also helping prepare that young person see beyond tomorrow. Because there's so much thought of just getting through the next day, both on the social worker's side and on the young person's side where does anyone think about what that young person is going to be like at 25, at 35 when they're a parent and preparing them and kind of almost giving them that vision that you know there's going to be life beyond high school or life beyond this week. And kind of letting everybody focus on the long term health?

Sixto Cancel [00:22:51]: Absolutely, I think the one thing that social workers can do is really figure out what is it going to take for this young person to step out of survival mode? And I think you know for me, I had turned 18, I had decided I was going to take a greyhound bus down to Virginia from Connecticut and actually go see my brother, right? And this was the first time I had you know, I'm 18, I get there, I'm with family. I turned around, I went to the club and it was such an out of body experience to sit at the balcony of that club and just watch people having fun because so much of life has been to be in that storm and I just couldn't understand how these people were just so happy. And so you know it was just

one of those moments where I realized to myself that I had to stop surviving and really start living. And that living is a very intentional thing but surviving is naturally how we're going to respond to the adversity and to the things that we're experiencing every single day.

Tom Oates [00:23:54]: Let them live. Let them...

Sixto Cancel [00:23:56]: Absolutely.

Tom Oates [00:23:57]: It's life versus you know struggle through it.

Sixto Cancel [00:24:02]: Absolutely and when I think of, when I think of a young person who is in foster care we should be the number one young people in the entire country who are thriving. We have a team of folks who are designed to be, who are designed to be around us, who built our success metrics right so that we're successful. We have a system that's supposed to be pumping in resources into us, not only on the academic side but on the social side, and the emotional side so we can be adults who thrive. There's a lot of flaws in the system so I don't understand when we do spend you know hundreds of thousands of dollars on one young person. An example is my younger brother who you know, grew up in group home care. The facility that he grew up in will charge \$864 a day and that's yet he aged out and you know unfortunately is incarcerated today because he ended up being homeless because he didn't engage in education which meant that he could not stay in the system. So there's these things that happen to all of us that I think you know, I don't understand how it is it that we have a system, well I do understand but it's astonishing that we allow it still to be acceptable that a system would put so much resources, so much manpower, so much effort into a young person not to allow, not to really give that young person everything that young person needs to thrive.

Tom Oates [00:25:22]: Sixto you are the cofounder of Think of Us so tell me what Think of Us is.

Sixto Cancel [00:25:27]: So Think of Us seeks to leverage data technology and multimedia to really improve policy, practice in youth and family outcomes, right. So some of the things we're doing is tools that help build capacity within young people and systems. Really understanding data on a different level, of turning around and understand hey how do we really have data drive decisions around what young people should be getting involved in? What are some of the developmental opportunities that they may have missed and they may want to engage with. So figuring out things from simple things from like how do I navigate the foster care system through our tools to how do I navigate some of the, my love life rules right? So those are some of the things that we're building.

Tom Oates [00:26:15]: So there's, if there's a social worker out there or a young person who wants to get in touch with you, how do they go about doing that?

Sixto Cancel [00:26:22]: They can visit our website at www.thinkof-us.org or they can email us at info@thinkof-us.org.

Tom Oates [00:26:35]: Okay, Sixto Cancel I appreciate the time, thank you so much for the insight and thank you so much for sharing.

Sixto Cancel [00:26:41]: Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Tom Oates [00:26:44]: So there you have it. A really inspiring fellow with a great deal of insight. If you're interested in more about engaging youth in foster care, check out the youth section of Child Welfare Information Gateway for more about engaging and involving youth and our resources specifically for youth and including links and other resources about transitioning into adulthood and independent living. All of that is available for free on Information Gateway. Just go to childwelfare.gov and search youth. You can also find other resources and information we've got there for those working or supporting foster care and that includes for parents, communities, and for youth themselves in care as well. Just head to childwelfare.gov, the search bar is on the upper right of every page. So we do this, we put these podcasts together for you. So we hope you find this valuable. You can reach us at info@childwelfare.gov with any questions, or if you've got some ideas that you want to hear about please let us know, info@childwelfare.gov. So thanks so much for joining us at the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast and we'll see you next time.

Female Narrator [00:27:53]: Thanks for joining us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast. Child Welfare Information Gateway is available at childwelfare.gov and is a service of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, administration for children and families. The views and opinions expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect those of Information Gateway or the Children's Bureau.