



ENGAGING AND EMPOWERING YOUTH VOICES

Guidance for Organizations and Youth

WRITTEN BY

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2023 See Us, Support Us
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The Omowale Project



This document was co-created by people who experienced the incarceration of a parent during their childhood and the Osborne Association's New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents (NYCIP). NYCIP raises awareness, promotes policies and practices, and builds partnerships to ensure that children's rights are upheld, their relationships supported, and their potential nurtured during their parent's involvement in the criminal legal system.

NYCIP also coordinates **See Us, Support Us (SUSU)**, a national initiative that builds community among and raises awareness about children of incarcerated parents, highlighting their voices, strengths, and needs, and offering recommendations for how to support them. Launched in 2015 by the Osborne Association, SUSU began as a month-long effort to see and support children of incarcerated parents and is now a year-round effort with global partners, culminating in a month of action in October. Visit the SUSU website to access resources and support at www.susu-osborne.org

About the Authors

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We dedicate this document to our dear friend and mentor, Ann Adalist-Estrin, who consistently included young people as partners, and tirelessly advocated for their voices to be valued and their recommendations adopted.

"This document is in dedication to the woman who's always reminded me to use my voice for truth and keep a brave heart: my mom."

Chantel Jackson



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FOREWORD

By Emani Davis

The very existence of this document is a milestone. Not long ago, there was no guidance for how to engage young people in advocacy with care or respect. Too often, youth were tokenized—invited to the table but not truly listened to. Early in my career, I often had to create my own preparation and debrief processes just to ensure that young people could participate without being harmed. That we now have a resource like this, developed in partnership and under the guidance of young people, signals how far we have come. It reflects a shift toward intentionality, collaboration, and equity, values that are essential if youth voices are to be honored in the ways they deserve.

My own journey into this work began at a very young age. I started visiting my father in prison when I was six years old. At that time, there was virtually no programming for fathers, no space to name or address the impact of incarceration on children. By the age of 14, I was advocating publicly for children of incarcerated parents. I was often the only young person in rooms filled with correctional administrators, law enforcement, researchers, and advocates. My presence was sometimes resented, other times dismissed. Adults questioned or tried to minimize my involvement, fearful of my ability to name the harm their policies and practices were causing, and unsettled by the new ideas and expectations I brought to the table. Those experiences taught me both the risks of exclusion and the power of authentic youth voice, lessons that continue to shape me today.

Osborne's leadership during times like this is no accident. Few organizations have been in the conversation about children and families impacted by incarceration. Osborne's focus on children grew directly out of its work with incarcerated parents, including my own family's experience after my father was sentenced to 107 years in prison. From those beginnings, Osborne pioneered the first comprehensive fatherhood program inside a New York State prison in 1986. I began working at Osborne's Family Center located in the visiting room at Sing Sing Correctional Facility at 18 years old, and by 20 I was teaching that fatherhood course. These milestones weren't simply programs; they were cultural shifts that centered families and recognized children as stakeholders. This legacy grounds Osborne's credibility and authority to help guide the field now.

The landscape has shifted since then. When I began, it was rare for young people to be present in advocacy or policy spaces. Today, most organizations working with youth understand the need to include them. This is progress worth celebrating, but presence alone is not enough. Exclusion still happens and representation without influence remains exploitative and bankrupt. The challenge before us is to ensure young people are not only in the room but shaping what happens within it: setting agendas, asking the questions, influencing policy, and helping to lead the way.

The guidance in this document reflects what we have learned over decades:

- Young people must be recognized as experts, co-collaborators, and creators, not simply as subjects of their trauma.

- Youth engagement should be substantive, extending to planning, agenda-setting, and decision-making.
- Inclusion must move beyond the symbolic. It is not enough to have a seat at the table; young people must have the power to shape the table-setting and what emerges from it.

This foreword is not a conclusion but an invitation. It invites you to treat youth voices with the seriousness they deserve, to honor young people as partners, and to let their leadership guide the future of our work. This guide is not issuing a top-down directive, but stewarding the lessons learned directly from children and young people over decades of practice and collaboration.

I am proud to witness and contribute to this moment. May this document be used not just as guidance, but as a commitment: a commitment to listen deeply, to trust young people's wisdom, to believe in their brilliance, and to build a more inclusive and just future together.

Emani Davis



Emani Davis (R) moderates the 2019 Osborne See Us, Support Us Youth Listening Session.

INTRODUCTION

Children and young adults who experience the arrest or incarceration of a parent may be asked to share their personal experiences publicly. They deserve to speak on their own terms, not out of obligation but from a place of intention and informed choice. Too often, their stories are used for emotional effect without care for their well-being or voice, or intention to act on their recommendations. Youth (i.e., children and young adults) can feel exploited, retraumatized, and unprepared as a result. This document offers guidance, informed by youth who have publicly shared their experiences with parental incarceration, to ensure that youth who decide to share their personal experiences are doing so with purpose and are supported throughout.

“Youth must be viewed as the experts they are, not as what hardships they’ve overcome.”

Chantel Jackson

The first section of this publication provides *Guidance for Adults Collaborating with Youth*. Youth must be viewed as experts and visionaries who bring insights, ideas, and solutions informed by their personal experiences to the conversation. They are more than their trauma and should not be asked to simply share “their stories” to move people (such as attendees at fundraisers) or be tokenized as a representative with lived experience. Engaging youth as equal thought partners whose ideas are valued and time is compensated supports youth development and reduces the likelihood of stigmatizing or retraumatization. Youth should not be expected to represent or speak for all young people with incarcerated parents. Their voice is one of many, and their uniqueness should be celebrated.

The second section offers *Guidance for Youth About Sharing Personal Experiences with Parental Incarceration*. They are encouraged to ask intentional questions to determine whether sharing their experiences is something they are truly interested in, and to advocate for being equal partners in the planning process who retain control over how their stories are told. Youth are advised to consider how publicly sharing may impact them now and in the future, to stand firmly in only sharing what they feel comfortable with, and to advocate for support that meets their unique needs.

Most of these recommendations can be used when young people are sharing their personal experiences about other topics as well and we encourage readers to share this resource widely.

SECTION ONE

Guidance for Adults Collaborating with Youth

I. Preparing to Engage Youth and Their Families

It is important to lead with integrity, humility, and compassion. Begin by reflecting on what this engagement means to you or your organization and consider whether the request may take advantage of youth for the sake of achieving your goals. Ensure that you are able to provide holistic support before engaging youth in the process. Keep in mind that speaking engagements, especially fundraisers, can make youth feel exploited if they're not supported in the right way. Reconsider your purpose and approach if the engagement may not benefit youth (for example, building skills, peer support, or creating policy change), or if you are unable to provide support.

Before engaging youth, do the following:

- **Establish your proposed goals:** Once you engage youth, seek their input and be open to amending the goals.
- **Designate a point person** who has a relationship with the youth to conduct the initial outreach and support youth throughout.
- **Identify benefits to youth** for participating and adapt these to meet youth's unique needs. Youth must be compensated for their time.
- **Consider and address potential harm** that a youth and their family may experience as a result of participating and reassess throughout.
- **Develop a process for engaging youth** under 18 years old and their parent or caregiver.
- **Understand and honor cultural beliefs** and practices about sharing.
- **Avoid narratives that stigmatize or victimize** children, such as "silent victims," "breaking family curses," or "breaking the cycle of intergenerational incarceration."
- **Use person-first language** and avoid stigmatizing narratives such as referring to children as "victims."

#WordsMatter

“ People talk about our parents in ways we wouldn't even talk about them. They do not stop being people, or parents, when they go to prison or jail, and neither should we stop treating them as such. ”

— Melissa Tanis, daughter of an incarcerated parent

Instead of “inmates” or “offenders” say...

- Parent
- People who are incarcerated
- People who have been in conflict with the law

Instead of “felons” or “ex-cons” say...

- Formerly Incarcerated Person
- Returning Citizen
- People with prior criminal justice involvement

Join us in changing the narrative—by listening to the children who are directly affected, celebrating their resilience, and using humanizing language when referring to people who are incarcerated.

Find more resources at: www.osborneny.org/susu

Learn more at susu-osborne.org/words-matter

II. Offer Specific and Revocable Consent

Written consents ensure that all parties are on the same page. Be cognizant that families may feel like they must consent to share their images, experiences, and more to be part of a program. This is an unfair dilemma for families that can be reduced by using specific consents. Respect that youth may change their mind about sharing publicly.

When engaging youth under 18 years old, respect the complexities of family dynamics and be prepared to help a family think through their divergent ideas and concerns about what can be shared. Youth under 18 years old should be told during your initial outreach that their parent or caregiver must consent to their participation. If a parent does not consent, offer youth opportunities to contribute anonymously.

“Our stories are agents of change, but we shouldn’t have to give them away to be heard and seen. Sharing is a choice, not a requirement.”

Chantel Jackson

- **Specific consent:** Youth prefer sharing for a clearly defined purpose and through specific outlets.
- **Be transparent:** Explain how, where, and for how long the content will be shared.
- **Empower choice:**
 - Encourage youth to ask questions and request changes.
 - Convey that it is okay to refuse to participate.
 - Youth should review and approve content before public release.
 - Allow youth to withdraw consent at any point and discuss alternative ways they can contribute. For example, someone could speak on their behalf so their perspective is still represented.
 - Even with blanket consents, it is best practice to seek verbal approval from youth for each instance of sharing and to honor their wishes.
 - Include information on consent forms about who to contact to revoke consent.
- **Provide copies** of consent forms to the youth and their guardian if they are under 18 years old.
- **Share content** with youth (e.g., photos, videos, and news articles) so they can build their portfolio of work.

II. Offer Specific and Revocable Consent ^(cont.)

Checklist for Discussing Consent with Youth

SPECIFICS OF CONSENT

- **Content to be Shared:**
Discuss content (e.g., personal experiences, opinions, insights) that will be shared.
- **How Content Will Be Shared:**
Discuss how (e.g., verbal presentations, written statements, interviews, photographs, media stories) content will be shared.
- **Where Content Will Be Shared:**
Discuss specific locations/platforms (e.g., community events, online platforms, printed materials, social media channels, etc.) content will be shared.
- **For How Long Content Will Be Shared:**
Discuss the timeframe (indefinitely unless revoked) that content will be shared.
- **Compensation:**
Discuss any financial compensation participants will receive.

GUIDELINES FOR DISCUSSION

- Young people should be encouraged to ask questions and request changes regarding the content.
- Clearly communicate that young people have the right to refuse participation at any point.
- Clearly communicate that young people will have the opportunity to review and approve any content (e.g., op-eds, photos, quotes) before its public release. If there are circumstances in which this is not possible, discuss this with them.
- Clearly communicate that young people may withdraw consent at any point, and that alternative ways to contribute will be offered if consent is withdrawn.
- Clearly communicate that even with a written consent completed, verbal consent will be sought for specific activities.

III. Compensate Youth for Their Time and Expertise

Youth are experts who must be compensated as you would any consultant or professional you collaborate with. Pay youth a fair wage for their time and consider the following:

- **Youth should be compensated** for the event or activity, and their time spent preparing and debriefing.
- **Pay youth by check or direct deposit** when possible. Gift cards may not be practical and do not encourage saving.
- **Supplementary compensation:** Food, outings, gift baskets, etc., should be viewed as supplementary and not replace monetary compensation.
- **Do not make scholarships contingent** on public sharing.
- **Pay the same rate** to all youth participating in similar activities.
- **Include speaker honoraria in budgets** and funding proposals to ensure you are able to compensate youth monetarily.
- **Create an agreement or contract** for youth outlining the activities they are expected to participate in and how much they will be compensated.

Tip: It is unethical for journalists to pay people they interview. Keep this in mind when determining how much to compensate youth for time spent preparing for and debriefing about media interviews.



Youth Action Council members speak with a state lawmaker.

IV. Share Power and Co-Create with Youth

Invite youth into the planning process. Prepare youth in advance for what to expect during planning meetings and encourage them to share ideas. Be receptive to ideas and approaches that diverge from your own. Use the following strategies to effectively empower youth and amplify their voices:

- **Support growth:** Ask youth what experiences they would like to gain and offer roles and tasks that will help them achieve their goals.
- **Build leadership skills:** Create opportunities that build skills, confidence, independence, and a sense of ownership of the event or activities.
- **Equal partners:** Involve youth as active co-collaborators in developing messaging, recommendations, and for how and where their experience will be shared.
- **Prepare youth for planning activities:** Prepare youth for what to expect during planning meetings and provide background about who will attend. Ask youth to contribute to and approve agendas. Encourage them to share ideas during discussions and ask them about their ideas in advance so they feel confident in sharing ideas among larger groups.
- **Be open to ideas that differ from your own** or established practices, and incorporate feedback from youth. If an idea is not doable, thank them for their suggestion and explain the rationale for an alternative approach.
- **Respect youth voice:** Guide youth in shaping their narratives and offer editorial suggestions, but never overshadow their voice.
- **Encourage input:** Encourage youth to develop questions for panel discussions and offer opportunities to moderate. Ask for their input on who to invite to an event, and how best to share their ideas.
- **Accommodate youth** when scheduling meetings and events.



The Youth Team directs a See Us, Support Us promotional video.

V. Provide Holistic Support

A. Build Trusting Relationships

Building a trusting relationship with youth is essential for creating emotionally safe spaces for them to express themselves without causing harm. Building trust takes time. Nurture the relationship and offer future opportunities. Here are some tips for building trust:

- **If you do not have an existing relationship, involve an adult who does.**
- **Share information about yourself** and your work, including examples of your collaborations with youth.
- **Do not pressure youth** to participate and always have a backup plan in case a youth changes their mind.
- **Acknowledge youth for the courage** and tenacity it takes to share their experiences.
- **Do not ask prying questions**, psychoanalyze, or offer unsolicited advice. Never “pick” a youth’s brain. Do not push for emotional expression, which can be harmful.
- **Do not dispute or minimize** youth perspectives and experiences. If you do not understand their perspective, ask questions to fully understand.

“She made sure I was building confidence and learning new skills. She checked in a lot to be sure I was still on board. She told me that just because I said ‘yes,’ it was still okay to say, ‘I don’t feel comfortable talking anymore.’ That’s just something that I really love that she did for me.”

Jessica M.

“Make sure we have emotional and financial support. It is a very vulnerable thing for us to share our stories. Some people have not dealt with what they’ve been through and it can be a raw, emotional moment. To put your heart out there and relive the moment without support can make you feel used and abused.”

Linda Ricard

V. Provide Holistic Support ^(cont.)

B. Prepare Youth in Advance

Encourage youth to lead discussions with their insights and recommendations, rather than personal experiences, which can be triggering. Youth should only share painful memories when they choose to do so with a purpose in mind. The details that pull at the heartstrings often rip open wounds within youth even when they think they have healed. To avoid retraumatization, facilitate discussions that focus on their general experiences, the realities they faced, and their solutions rather than specific traumatic details.

- **Identify what to share:** Encourage youth to write down in advance what they wish to share, and most importantly, what they do not wish to share.
- **Respectful sharing:** Ensure youth are not pressured to talk about why a parent was incarcerated. If they choose to share, guide them through considering their reasons and the potential outcomes.
- **Introduce** youth to all panelists and moderators in advance.
- **Handling prying questions:** Determine in advance if a youth wishes to deflect questions on their own or if they prefer for the moderator to do so.
- **Knowing the audience:** Describe who the audience will be and offer guidance on tailoring their message accordingly.
- **Flexible sharing:** Offer options, such as prepared remarks, pre-recorded statements, or written reflections, to accommodate different comfort levels.
- **Share event details:** Provide information about the event in advance, including the location and how to get there, what time to arrive, who to ask for upon arrival, dress code, etc.
- **Introducing youth:** Ask youth how they wish to be introduced and encourage them to lead with their expertise and accomplishments. Being a child of an incarcerated parent is only one facet of their identity and should not be how they introduce themselves, unless they choose to.
- **Ample preparation time:** Rushing youth or making last-minute requests can potentially lead to exploitative or harmful situations.
- **Backup plan:** Develop a backup plan in case a youth is unable to participate due to unforeseen circumstances or changes their mind about sharing.

“Avoid retraumatization and oversharing. Years down the line, a youth may look back regretfully at the words they said so publicly about their parents when they were still healing and felt hurt, rather than the pride they currently feel for their parents.”

Ava Lantiere

V. Provide Holistic Support Throughout ^(cont.)

C. Offer Skill Development and Support

It is critical to prepare youth for the engagement and build upon their existing skills. If your organization has a communications department or works with a public relations firm, ask them to meet one-on-one with youth with a supportive adult present to offer guidance and support.

- **Public Speaking and Writing Workshops:** Offer training in public speaking and writing to enhance communication skills.
- **Practice and Feedback:** Provide opportunities to practice, especially among peers, and provide constructive feedback.
- **Biography Development:** Help youth identify their accomplishments to develop their bio and resumés, and provide youth with examples.
- **Encourage youth to be their authentic selves** and do not pressure them to code-switch (i.e., adopt behaviors and communication styles aligned with other cultures).
- **Deflecting and Pivoting:** Equip youth with strategies for deflecting unwelcome questions and pivoting back to their message.



Jada, *See Us, Support Us* Youth Team member, reads her poem at an event.

VI. Prioritize Well-being Throughout the Process

To ensure you are meeting youth's unique needs, co-create a "youth support plan" to manage concerns and emotions that may arise before, during, and after the engagement. Ask how you can be of support *throughout* the process and be clear about what you can and cannot provide. Understand that youth may not always recognize or be able to articulate the specific types of support they require, and that these can change over time.

- **Begin by asking, "How can I support you?"**
Ask youth what helped them navigate similar situations and assess their existing support system. A questionnaire can be a less intrusive way to gather this information and inform youth about available resources.
- **Manage family dynamics:** Provide youth with language and support for navigating family tensions that may arise.
- **Promote self-care:** Collaborate with youth to identify and implement activities they find calming and centering.
- **Help youth consider the emotional strain** they may experience as a result of sharing. If you have relevant training, assist them with identifying trauma triggers and teach them how trauma manifests in our bodies. Collaborate to develop strategies for managing their physical and emotional well-being.
- If needed, **connect youth with support professionals experienced** in working with families involved in the criminal legal system. They must be supportive of youth who wish to have relationships with incarcerated parents.
- **Provide referrals:** Be clear about what support you can offer during and after the collaboration. If ongoing support is not possible, provide referrals.
- **Address basic needs.** Always provide food and transportation assistance, and review clothing expectations. Offer assistance with obtaining clothing and hygiene products. These should never be viewed as compensation.
- **Offer support during presentations:** Encourage youth to invite supportive people to be present while they are speaking, including digital events. Identify in advance what they may need to feel comfortable in the moment.

"People who've experienced trauma and have not come out of survival mode often have difficulty identifying what they need. Providing time, space, and options to help them identify their needs could be beneficial."

Ava Lantiere

VI. Prioritize Well-being Throughout the Process ^(cont.)

- **Cultivate peer support.** Create opportunities for youth experiencing parental incarceration to connect with one another. Peer relationships can be a source of support and remind them they are not alone.
- **Protect from disrespect.** Implement a system whereby audience questions are submitted in advance or reviewed by a moderator before being presented. Be prepared to respond to or deflect disrespectful comments in real time.
- **Immediately debrief:** Debrief with youth after speaking engagements to check in on how they are feeling and offer positive feedback. Schedule a follow up within the week.



Refer youth to the See Us, Support Us website to connect with supportive resources: www.susu-osborne.org

VII. Create Pathways to Opportunity

We encourage you to view collaboration with young leaders as an opportunity to invest in and inspire them. Speak with youth about their career goals and share resources that can help them pursue their dreams, introduce them to people in their field of interest, and teach them soft skills that will help them succeed in professional settings.

- **Career Growth:** Connect youth to scholarships, internships, employment opportunities, and networking opportunities.
- **Job Readiness:** Offer workshops, including resumé writing and interview preparation.
- **Resumé Support:** Provide language for resúms that captures their public speaking experience and/or advocacy.
- **Impact:** Keep youth informed about the impact of their work.



Jamila, See Us, Support Us Youth Fellow and Youth Action Council member, emcees Osborne's annual benefit.

SECTION TWO

Guidance for Youth About Sharing Personal Experiences with Parental Incarceration

This section offers guidance from youth for determining if publicly speaking about your personal experience is for you. It can be empowering to speak from the heart and to feel your feelings, and it's also important to set boundaries and share with intention. We offer tips for how to advocate for your needs and to be in control of your narrative, compensated adequately, and supported throughout. We encourage you to ask to be part of planning for how your experiences will be shared.

For quick reference, see the checklist at the end of this document.

"You are more than your experience with parental incarceration. Your trauma isn't your whole identity. You have so much more to offer this world."

Chantel Jackson



Young people share their policy ideas for how to support children of incarcerated parents during a See Us, Support Us event moderated by co-author Allison Hollihan (L).

I. Ensure the Opportunity is Beneficial, Empowering, and Nurturing

- **Understand the Purpose:** Ask why you're being invited to share your story and what the purpose for doing so is.
- **Stay True to Your Goals:** Reflect on what you hope to accomplish by participating and decline if you don't feel like the opportunity is good for you.
- **Evaluate Your Motivation:** Consider if money is your only motivation for participating. If so, ask yourself if you are truly ready to share.
- **Consider the Benefits:** Think about the ways the opportunity may provide personal growth, build your skills and/or network, or help inform policy.
- **The Power of "No":** It is okay to say "no" even if the person asking you to share your story has supported you before. It is also okay to change your mind about participating after you agreed to do so.
- **Maintain Boundaries:** If you are asked to share something you don't want to share, decline or offer to share anonymously, in a third person voice, or contribute in other ways.
- **Get Paid:** Ask how and when you will be paid for your time, including preparation time. If you feel the compensation is unfair, ask for more. Ask for a payment method that meets your needs (e.g., check, gift card, electronic deposit).
- **Understand limitations:** It is unethical for journalists to pay people they interview. Since you cannot be compensated for time spent with a journalist, ask the organizers to consider this when determining your overall compensation.
- **Be open to support:** Ask how you will be supported and let people know what you need as it arises.
- **Participate in planning:** Ask how you can be involved in planning how your experiences and wisdom will be shared.

"If you decide not to share, suggest that another youth or staffer step in and speak on your behalf so your perspective is still represented. You can also contribute by talking about someone else's story or a broader issue instead of your own. If you are not comfortable sharing live, offer to create a pre-recorded statement or written reflection so you are included."

Linda Ricard

II. Consent Should be Specific, Clear, and Revocable

What is consent? Consent gives an organization permission to share your words and/or images publicly. This ensures everyone is in agreement about how your story will be shared. You may be asked to sign a “blanket consent” stating you allow an organization to share your photo and words however they choose. This may even be required to participate in a program. This is unfair and you should **always advocate that consent be specific and clear to ensure you are in control of your story.**

Does my parent or caregiver have to sign my consent? If you are under 18 years old, your parent or caregiver must also sign the consent. You may not want your family to know you are talking about having an incarcerated parent, or they may not allow you to. If so, explain your concerns to the person asking you to share your story and collaborate to find a solution. **If your parent or caregiver does not consent, explore if you can share anonymously or if there are other ways you can contribute.**

This list outlines important steps to take before signing a consent form for sharing a personal story.

- **Request and understand a consent:**

Ask for a consent form that clearly explains how your experiences and images will be shared. These forms can be confusing. Read them carefully and ask for explanations if you need to.

- **Clarify details:** Ask where your story will be shared and for how long. It’s okay to ask for your story to be shared for a specified timeframe and with specific audiences only. Be sure to share any concerns you have about specific people seeing your story.

- **Address your concerns:** Ask for your concerns to be addressed before signing a consent. If your concerns are not taken seriously, don’t sign.

- **Ask how to take back your consent** if you change your mind and who to contact to do so.


- **Ask to review content** (e.g., op-ed, photos, quotes, etc.) before public release.

“I’m able to draw boundaries after experiencing a lot of panels and learning what I’m comfortable with. I started taking my last name off of some things. Someone should explain to you what you’re signing up for, and ask you what you are comfortable with. Are you comfortable with having your full name displayed? Are you comfortable with your video being posted online or on the news?”

Ava Lantiere

III. You Are in Charge—Advocate for Yourself

- **Be recognized as an expert:** Advocate to be viewed as an expert on your needs and system changes, not just your trauma. You are qualified to talk about what you need as much as a policy expert.
- **Challenge incorrect narratives:** Speak up if you disagree with how people are talking about your experiences, including parental incarceration and its impact on you. Share how you think it should be discussed.
- **Be authentic:** Don't feel pressure to code switch (change your behavior and how you speak to align with another culture).
- **You are in control:** You decide what you will share and whether to answer a question. Seek help from a trusted adult or peer if you feel pressured to share something.
- **Guide the conversation:** Speak up about what you want the audience to learn and how you want to share your ideas and experiences. Your ideas are valuable.
- **Participating on panels:** If you are part of a panel discussion, offer to write the questions and let people know if you would like to be the moderator.
- **Seek assistance:** Don't hesitate to ask for help with public speaking or writing your ideas down. Don't let anyone put words in your mouth.
- **Achieve your career goals:** If you see ways an organization might be able to help you achieve your career goals, let them know.




Spotlight

Unsilenced Voices: Fighting for Family Connections Behind Bars

Visits motivate our parents to pursue goals and transform their lives so they can be the parents we need them to be.

Jamila Small and Jaiden Valentin, Osborne Association's Youth Action Council

June 5, 2024



Jaiden Valentin and Jamila Small, YAC members.

“Be your authentic self and don’t really worry about being perfect or saying the right thing. I kind of wish I knew that back then.”

Linda Ricard

Youth Action Council members write an op-ed.

IV. Ask for Support: Sharing Personal Experiences May Be Difficult

Speaking publicly is rewarding, and can also feel stressful and draining. It may feel like you are leaving part of yourself with the audience, so asking for support and using mindfulness techniques may be helpful. You may unexpectedly become emotional in the moment or feel nervous, which may result in sharing more than you planned to. Preparing in advance about what you will and will not share and having support in place will help. With practice, it may feel easier to talk about your experiences, but it's always important to center yourself.

- **Public speaking:** Ask for tips and training if you'll be speaking.
- **Writing support:** If you are writing, ask for guidance and feedback.
- **Creating a biography:** You may be asked to provide a "bio" that describes who you are and what you've achieved, big and small. Ask to see examples of a "bio" to guide you when creating your own.
- **Know the details:** Confirm where the event or meeting will be held, and ask for directions and assistance with getting to the event if needed. Ask if food will be provided. Inquire about clothing requirements and ask for help getting an appropriate outfit if you don't have one.
- **Communication:** Tell organizers how to reach you (e.g., phone, text, email) and ask for their contact information.
- **Identify self-care activities** to ensure you are rested and calm during the event. For example, hydrate, practice mindfulness, stream shows, or listen to music.
- **Managing physical responses to stress:** Stress and emotions can cause physical responses like a pounding heart, a tight chest, trembling, or freezing up. You may re-experience past events in the present. Figure out what helps you feel regulated and present. Learning to manage your body's responses and feeling prepared can reduce distress.
- **Invite a supportive person to the event** and look at them if you feel nervous. Request that your supportive person can attend the event for free.
- **Ask for support:** If thinking about your experiences is more difficult than expected, ask if counseling, peer support, mindfulness coaching, and other types of support you are interested in are available.
- **Post-event support:** Plan in advance to meet with the organizers and other speakers right after the event to get feedback and support.
- **Follow-up with the organizers** if they don't respond to your questions or your needs aren't fully met. Never hesitate to call or email them.

V. Share with Purpose: Set Boundaries and Prioritize Your Well-being

Identifying what you hope to achieve by sharing your story is important. This is an opportunity for you to raise awareness, offer guidance, advocate for change, and empower others with similar experiences. You may realize new things about yourself, be more courageous than you thought, and come to understand that you should not feel embarrassed about having an incarcerated parent. You may even inspire other youth to use their voices! Your trauma isn't who you are and you have so much more to offer. Allow people to see you as your whole self and not just as a youth with an incarcerated parent. You have a lot of experiences and ideas to share. Remember that you are in control. To advocate for yourself, it's important to do the following:

- **Set boundaries:** Decide in advance what you are and are not comfortable sharing to avoid oversharing in the moment. Only you should decide what to share.
- **Practice deflecting questions:** Ask for advice on how to deflect questions you do not want to answer and how to pivot back to your message. You can say, "I'm not comfortable sharing that." If you prefer the moderator to deflect questions, plan for this ahead of time.
- **Control your narrative:** You do not have to introduce yourself as the child of an incarcerated parent or talk about why a parent was incarcerated unless you choose to do so.
- **Your experience is powerful:** Our lives are shaped by what we experience and learn. Be true to yourself, speak from the heart, and most importantly, refrain from self-blame.
- **Practice and seek feedback:** Practice, especially among peers, and be open to constructive feedback.
- **Feel emotions:** It's okay to allow yourself to cry and be emotional. It can be healing and empowering to feel your emotions. Don't hesitate to ask for support.
- **Prioritize yourself:** You are in control and you don't ever need to share more than you want. Don't allow others to exploit you.



Co-author Chantel Jackson, *See Us, Support Us Youth Fellow*, preparing for a radio interview at WNYC.

"Introduce yourself as who you are, not what hardships you have experienced or overcome."

Chantel Jackson

VI. Network! This is an Opportunity to Achieve Your Goals

View this as an opportunity to further yourself. The experience may motivate you to educate yourself further and expand your passions. Build relationships with the people you are collaborating with and learn as much as you can. Use this opportunity to do the following:

- **Make connections:** Ask for people's names and contact information. Don't hesitate to contact them in the future.
- **Tap into peers:** This may be an opportunity to connect with and gain support from youth with similar experiences. You are not alone.
- **Seek future opportunities:** Ask to be considered for future speaking and advocacy opportunities.
- **Update your resumé:** Include the experience on your resumé and ask for input about what to write.
- **Ask about resources:** Ask about scholarships, internships, job readiness workshops, and employment opportunities.
- **Know your impact:** Ask to be kept updated. Knowing your impact is empowering and maintaining connections may lead to future opportunities.

You know what is best for you. Speaking publicly on any topic can be challenging yet rewarding. If you are nervous, try to push yourself out of your comfort zone while also seeking support. If you begin to change your mind after agreeing to speak, communicate how you are feeling immediately. Explore if supports can be put in place to make you more comfortable. If not, politely decline and let people know as soon as possible so they can find another speaker.

Always be true to yourself. Thank you for sharing your voice and making a difference!



Visit the *See Us, Support Us* website at www.susu-osborne.org to connect with resources and content by and for youth with incarcerated parents.



See Us, Support Us Youth Fellows collaborate with Aysa Branch, Miss USA 2020.

VII. Youth Checklist: Should I Share My Personal Experiences Publicly?

This checklist offers guidance for how to determine if publicly speaking about parental incarceration and more is for you.

A. Is the Opportunity Beneficial, Empowering, and Nurturing?

- Understand the purpose of sharing.
- Think about whether the opportunity aligns with your personal goals.
- Evaluate your motivations.
- Consider the benefits (e.g., personal growth, skill building, systems change).
- Consider the potential risks (e.g., emotional response, family strain, loss of privacy, revealing citizenship status).
- Remember your right to say “no.”
- Maintain personal boundaries on what you share.
- Ask to be compensated for your time. Ask how and when you will be paid.
- Identify your potential expenses and ask that they be covered (e.g., transportation, clothes).
- Seek support and communicate your needs.
- Ask to participate in planning how your story is shared.

B. Consent Should Be Specific, Clear, and Revocable

- Understand any consent form before signing it.
- Do not sign a consent form if it is unclear or is not specific enough.
- Clarify where and for how long your story will be shared.
- Be sure to share any concerns you have about specific people seeing your story.
- Know how to withdraw your consent if you change your mind.
- Ask to review content about you before public release.

C. You Are in Charge—Advocate for Yourself

- Advocate to be recognized as an expert on your needs and systems change.
- Challenge incorrect narratives about parental incarceration.
- Be genuine and honest about who you are.
- Guide the conversation and share what you want the audience to learn.
- Offer to help write panel questions or moderate.
- Seek assistance with public speaking or writing.
- Ask the organizers to help you achieve your career goals.
- If your parent or caregiver doesn't consent to you sharing publicly, ask the organizers if there are other ways you can tap into the opportunity.

VII. Youth Checklist: Should I Share My Personal Experience? (cont.)

D. Always Ask for Support. Sharing Personal Experiences May Be Difficult.

- Ask for public speaking tips and training.
 - Ask for writing guidance and feedback. Do not let your voice be overshadowed.
 - Request examples of a “bio” and get feedback on your own.
 - Ask about the event details (e.g., transportation, food, pay).
 - Inform organizers how best to communicate with you.
 - Identify what self-care means to you and practice it.
 - Invite a supportive person to the event.
 - Inquire about counseling or peer support if you are interested, especially if you are feeling emotional.
 - Meet with organizers and fellow speakers for feedback and support after the event.
 - Follow up with the organizers or a trusted adult if your needs aren’t met.
-

E. Share with Purpose and Set Boundaries

- Set clear boundaries on what you will and will not share.
 - Practice deflecting questions you don’t want to answer.
 - Don’t feel obligated to share details you don’t want to.
 - Practice public speaking and seek feedback.
 - Allow your emotions to come through; it’s okay to cry.
 - Prioritize your well-being and do not let people exploit you.
-

F. Network! This is an Opportunity to Achieve Your Goals

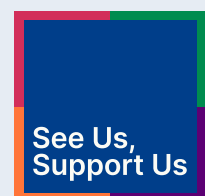
- Make connections and exchange contact information.
- Tap into peer support from others with similar experiences.
- Seek future speaking and advocacy opportunities.
- Update your resumé with your speaking experiences.
- Ask about scholarships, internships, and job opportunities.
- Stay informed about the impact of sharing your story.

“May this document be used not just as guidance, but as a commitment: a commitment to listen deeply, to trust young people’s wisdom, to believe in their brilliance, and to build a more inclusive and just future together.”

From the foreword by Emani Davis, The Omowale Project



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