

# Strategic Sharing

Your story is **PRECIOUS**  
and **HARD-EARNED**.

Protect yourself  
and others by using  
**strategic sharing!**

## why is it important?

Being asked to tell your story or even share a detail about your past can be flattering. It promises understanding and empathy from other people. But sharing details about your life without strategic sharing can backfire. You could make a mistake and tell things you wanted to keep private. You might awaken painful emotions that you aren't prepared to handle, like sadness and fear and regret. You could risk being emotionally traumatized all over again.

When it comes to your story, you are the expert. Your story is something you earned, and an asset that only you have. It's important to treat your personal story with the respect it deserves. This

## what is strategic sharing?

As a young person with experience in foster care, you may want to tell someone certain details about your personal story or just answer a question about your past. You might be called on to share your story with a group. You may even want to write about your experiences online. Whatever the situation, it's a good idea to learn strategic sharing strategies.

Strategic sharing means you need to be clear about what you will say. Your first goal is to protect yourself, other people who might be involved in your story, your audience, and your personal story. You'll want a plan. You'll want control about what parts of your story you want to let out and what to hold back.

includes making intentional and thoughtful decisions about when to use your story, for what you are willing to lend your story, how much you wish to share, who you want to allow to hear your story, and what types of preparation and supports you'll need to do the best job possible.

Without strategic sharing, you risk revealing hurtful facts about the people in your life. You'll want to plan and practice not using names when telling details of your past, like honoring a sister's wish not to tell that she is in foster care. Even if your biological family has made mistakes, broadcasting those mistakes could hurt family members. You also risk revealing

private information about another person who would be upset that their information was made public.

Another reason for strategic sharing is to protect your audience or the person you are speaking with. Sharing too much can make them feel uncomfortable and can traumatize. Certain life facts may not be appropriate at certain times and for certain people or groups.

Once your story is written or recorded, it may be difficult or impossible to take back. What you share is potentially public forever and could possibly show up years later.

# sharing CIRCLES...

Strategic sharing begins with a look at the relationships you have in your life. In the Sharing Circle, you are the center of the Circle. And all the people in your life and people you meet are organized in circles surrounding you. The Sharing Circle shows that not all your relationships are equal, so not all your sharing is equal, either. It means that the closer the circle is to you, the more life facts you can feel good

about sharing. Those strangers and acquaintances don't have a right to the same information about you as friends, right? Each circle getting closer to you represents the people more and more in your support system. The closer they are, the better you feel about sharing the details of

your life. And don't forget, there may be certain secrets that are better guarded and left unsaid because they are very, very personal.



A former FosterClub All-Star was once asked to do an article about homelessness in a major magazine. After the article was released he was contacted by a man offering him a place to stay, a car, and a job. The All-Star came to FosterClub very excited about what he thought was a great opportunity. Caution was stressed and after some discussion, it was decided a supportive adult in his area would go to the first meeting to make sure everything was safe. Turns out that the man had bad intentions for the young person and was planning to take advantage of his vulnerable position. If you are asked to tell your story publicly, it is critical that you partner with an adult supporter to keep yourself safe.

Name 3 places where you might meet strangers who ask questions about your story:

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An acquaintance is someone you've met (and probably know their name), but who you do not know very well. Name three:

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Name three people who are in this category, but not in the friends/family category:

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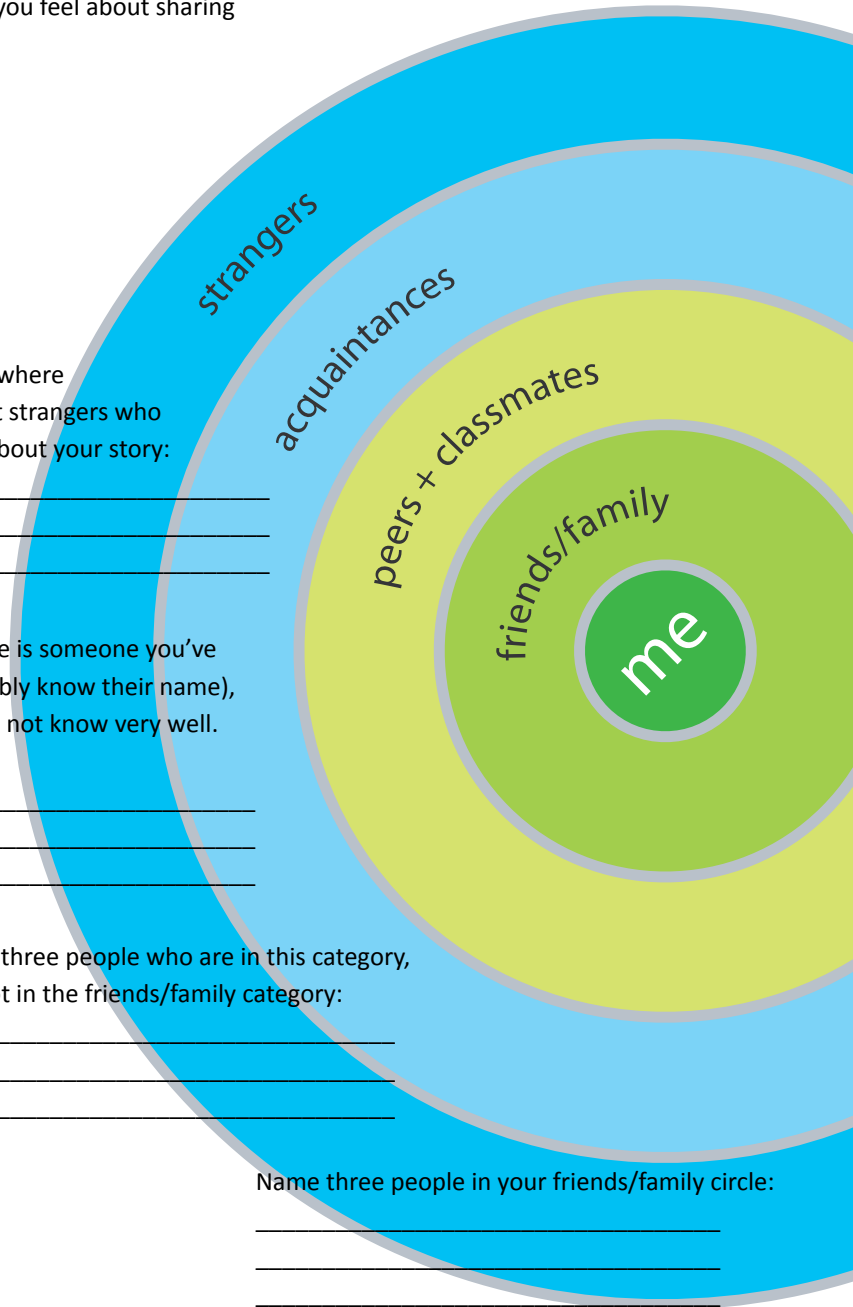
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Name three people in your friends/family circle:

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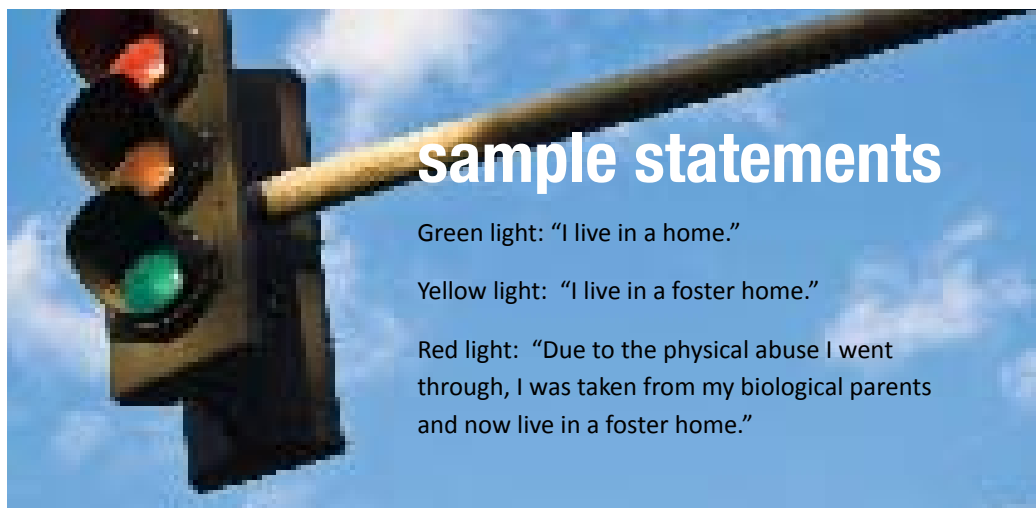


# RED light, YELLOW light, GREEN light strategy

The red light, yellow light, green light strategy is a strategic sharing tool to help figure out what is okay to say and what is not okay to say in the sharing circles. Some statements can be made to anyone at any time and are green light “go” statements. Like, “I have a sister.”

Yellow light statements require us to slow down and think about consequences. Like, “I have a sister that I haven’t seen in over a year.” Often yellow light statements give glimpses into private information or would cause a person to ask personal questions. Yellow light statements should only be said in certain circumstances and probably limited to certain peers and classmates.

Red light statements, you guessed it, should be kept within family (including foster family) and a few good friends. Like, “My sister and I were physically abused.” Think twice before sharing Red light statements. What will be the consequences to you and others?



## sample statements

Green light: “I live in a home.”

Yellow light: “I live in a foster home.”

Red light: “Due to the physical abuse I went through, I was taken from my biological parents and now live in a foster home.”

One more “red light, green light” strategy is to know your audience. In some circumstances, for example, you may be asked to share your story with an audience of case workers (strangers). Depending on your comfort level, it would be green light to talk about why you were put into foster care and how your experience with case workers has been. This is not information you would share with just any group of strangers,

but it would be okay with this specialized audience.

If you are unsure of what is red, green, or yellow, share your story with your group and or adult supporter before speaking.



FosterClub All Star Dan Knapp was once asked and agreed to do an interview with *Time* magazine. After the article came out, many people read the piece, even people Dan did not know. In the

article, Dan talked about his adoptive mother. Guess what? His mother read the article, and took very personally what Dan had said, causing some stress on their relationship. This goes to show you the importance of strategic sharing!

“In agreeing to an interview with *Time* magazine, I knew I had to consider how the things I would say could impact my family members. But, I also had to consider how sharing personal

information about my life could impact my relationships with friends, colleagues, even people who didn’t know me very well. It bothers me when I see interviews with youth and it is apparent that no one helped them think through what they would say publicly.”

— Daniel Knapp, New York

# what's your ESCAPE HATCH?

Using the sharing circles and the lights as tools are great ways to control what you say, but what about those times when you meet someone or do a speaking gig and you get asked questions that would require you to respond with red light statements you are not comfortable with? Some real questions that get asked include:

“What was the abuse like?”

“What did you do to get into foster care?”

“Aren’t foster parents in it just for the money?”

Generally, people ask these questions because they are curious or uninformed, not because they are trying to hurt you. But wouldn’t it be nice if you had some ready to give response in your back pocket that you could just whip out anytime you got asked one of these questions? That’s exactly what an escape hatch is all about. It provides you with a way to step out of the question, and can provide a way to educate the person doing the asking.

## A note about confidentiality:

In foster care, there is a legal requirement that certain information is kept private. Check with your caseworker, attorney, or other knowledgeable adult to make sure the story you tell does not break confidentiality. You also can play it safe by not using people’s real names.



For example, when asked a personal question that you don’t want to answer directly, try redirecting the conversation to a more general topic. Here are some lines you can use to get your answer started:

“Many youth in foster care feel...”

“There are some things I am not able to discuss.”

“It is a common stereotype that foster youth...”

“Not all youth in foster care...”

“Many child welfare professionals...”

Let’s take a look at how we could answer the earlier questions using this strategy:

### 1) What was the abuse like?

“Foster youth usually enter foster care due to neglect, not physical or sexual abuse.”

### 2) What did you do to get into foster care?

“It is a common stereotype that foster youth have done something to put themselves into care, but this is just not true. Most children are in foster care are due to the parents’ inability to provide care and safety for the child.”

### 3) Do you have a bad caseworker?

“Many child welfare professionals have a very large caseload that can lead to them having to focus on the youth that need assistance right now.”

The one all answering escape hatch that is perfectly okay to use if you are asked a question you don’t feel comfortable with is this:

“I don’t feel comfortable answering that question.”

Don’t think you have to answer every question you are asked. It’s YOUR unique story. Honor it. Guard it. Respect yourself.



## time for DEBRIEF...

Sharing your story provides lots of opportunities for personal growth. If you plan to share your story publicly, the best way to make sure that you grow and improve is to build in time to reflect after each experience.

Just like great athletes or performers work with a coach or trainer to review their performances, working with a supportive adult you trust is key to ensuring that you have the support you need to effectively share your story and improve your public speaking skills.

As you've learned, sharing your story can also carry with it the chance for negative repercussions. Harsh feedback from others, stirred up memories, and mixed emotions can all come with sharing your story with others. Debriefing with a

supportive adult provides an opportunity to explore any issues that arise. It also ensures that you have someone who will understand where you're coming from should any issues come up later. It's not unusual to have 'aha' moments or feelings that arise days, or even weeks, after sharing your story.

If you share your story in a group - such as within a youth panel - your 'team' might choose to debrief with your 'coach' or supportive adult as a group or 1-on-1 or both. You might discuss what you thought worked well during your sharing session and opportunities for growth. You might also explore your feelings about what was said (either by you, other panelists, or by the audience through a question and answer session).

## tips for SUPPORTIVE ADULTS...

If you are a supportive adult who is working with youth preparing to share their story publicly, it is your duty to ensure the youth is ready and trained for their big moment. This includes making sure they have practiced, understand the concepts of strategic sharing, know who their audience is, and have support during and after their presentation.

Support for a young person doesn't end when the event is over. Often, speaking publicly and answering questions brings old issues to the surface. Be sure to debrief with your young person after they have shared their story.

It can be difficult for young people to negotiate the terms of a speaking engagement on their own behalf — even adults have agents to help them negotiate deals. Youth often have difficulties saying no to an event, even if it interferes with school or work. As a supporter, you can help negotiate stipends, expenses, and ensure that the opportunity is in the best interest of the youth.

As a supportive adult, it's important to ensure the safety of a young person, particularly when their story is shared with the media. Prepare and support the youth in the event they receive feedback or offers from strangers who hear their story.



Aaron Weaver, 2006 All Star, was asked for the first time ever to share his story in front of a group of people. He had never done anything like this before, and did not know what to expect. What was worse is that no one coached him through how to share his story. Even though he wrote out what he wanted to say, due to lack of practice and support, his first public speaking opportunity led to learning some hard lessons through a very emotional breakdown in front of many people.

"While I believe those who asked me to speak had good intentions, the truth is that I was ill-equipped for this experience which would result in excavating traumatic experiences from my past. No one had helped me to prepare, no one had warned me about the resurfacing emotions (hurt, pain, fear, insecurity, unworthiness, feeling small and unimportant in my own life), and no one had coached me through this process. I had a general outline but no real point to what I wanted to say. My mighty mission was to improve foster care, but I was like a soldier going into battle without any training or protection."  
— Aaron Weaver, foster care alum, Nebraska

# what now? how do I USE MY STORY?

There are lots of chances to use your unique story and your voice to make a difference in the foster care system. Listed below are some of the ways you can use your voice.

**Youth panels** – You talk about your story along with other people who can be either youth or child welfare professionals or parents. You are adding your story to others in order to educate.

**Committees and advisory boards** – Many states have youth boards and committees for youth who want to be involved. Here you would use your voice for a variety of causes, most times to influence state or organizational policy. Visit [www.fosterclub.com](http://www.fosterclub.com) or [www.nrcyd.ou.edu](http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu) to find listings of youth boards in your state.

**Child and Family Service Reviews** – This is where the Federal government comes in to assess how well states are doing in

making sure foster youth are succeeding and getting their needs met. This is a great way to make your voice heard.

## **National Youth in Transition Database**

– This is a national effort to collect information about youth as they transition from care. You'll be asked to complete a survey at the ages of 17, 19, and 21. The information you provide will help to determine what the state needs to improve. So when you get the message that they want you to take a survey, use your voice and make a difference. Contact your State Independent Living Coordinator to get involved.

Here's a final suggestion. Accept as your personal mission to do what you can to make foster care better. Now that you understand STRATEGIC SHARING, use your unique personal story to advocate for other youth in the foster care system.



"Youth in foster care have already been through so much — if they are going to be put out there to share their stories publicly, it's important they receive the training and support they need to protect themselves from harm or humiliation while doing it."

— Lupe T, foster care alumna

Lupe's story took place while she was in college, and was asked to be interviewed about her foster care experience. She had only a few pictures of herself from a young age, and she was promised the article and pictures would be small ones. The next day her pictures were on the front cover and very large; Lupe had just been outed about her being in foster care in a very noticeable and public way. Luckily, however, she had been properly trained.

"I remember practicing responses to people if they asked about it but at that point I had been coached on strategic sharing which helped a lot."



**FosterClub All-Star**  
Christopher Andrade shares  
his story for a video project

## **Where it started...**

The concept of strategic sharing was originated by Maria Garin Jones and foster care alumni Terry Harrak for the National Foster Youth Advisory Council, a project of the Child Welfare League Of America, in 2000. Over the years, additional concepts have been added the original concept of strategic sharing.

# quiz YOURSELF...

Use this step-by-step guide to begin developing your own story.

Step 1: Define your purpose for sharing. This could be to 'educate social workers on how youth think things should be done' or 'tell judges why youth need to be in court' or 'advocate for change in certain legislative policies.'

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**What's your escape hatch?** How would you answer these questions from a nosy stranger, using the escape hatch technique?

1) What was the abuse like?

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2) What did you do to get into foster care?

3) Do you have a bad caseworker?

If and when you get to a point in your story where you can feel emotions coming up that you haven't prepared for, you can simply say "that's all I would like to share at this point" and then be sure to talk to a trusted adult about this and the next part of your story. Once you have processed this, you will be able to share these 'new' parts of your story during your next speaking engagement which can lead to being an even more effective youth leader.

Step 2: Decide what you would like to share. Be sure to keep in mind tips mentioned before. Reflect on specific aspects of your story and how it would relate to the audience (Ex: if for a court panel, focus more on your experience in court, for workers focus on your experience you had with your worker(s). Be sure to include solutions to the problems and point out what was helpful in each situation.

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Step 3: Write it down. This provides a great back up if you go blank while speaking. Some people work best if they have every detail of their story written out, others work better when they speak from bullet points. Of course, use extra paper if necessary.

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Step 4: Share it with your youth leadership group as if you were sharing with your audience. If there is more than one speaker, this will help to ensure there is little overlap on stories and you can focus on unique experiences which will provide a better overview for the audience. This helps to make sure you stay in your allotted time frame. Also, emotions can come up during speaking, especially if it is an area of your story that you have not spoken much about before or if there are currently things going on with that part of your story. Sharing with your group will allow you to work out these feelings in a safe environment prior to speaking.

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