

## Listening to Youth in Foster Care

Hear from 4 young people who experienced early trauma and their advice for helping others come out on the other side. Pictured, left to right, Maya Coley, Heather Huddleston, and Justin Martinez.

*Kaiser Permanente and Mental Health California recently hosted [Youth Listening Sessions](#) in 3 Northern California cities — Oakland, Sacramento, and Fresno — to hear directly from people ages 16 to 26 who are or have been in foster care or the juvenile justice system. For participating nonprofit organizations who partner with Mental Health California, the real-time reflections on [adverse childhood experiences](#) (ACEs) help them better understand how to serve California’s youth. With children who have been involved with foster care experiencing at least 4 of the 10 types of ACEs, it is also powerful information for therapists to provide even more attuned mental health care to their patients. Meet 4 young people during the Oakland session who talked about life during and after foster care.*

### Maya Coley, 22



Maya entered foster care at 16, after spending her childhood living with a mother addicted to alcohol and drugs. Not long after, Maya underwent involuntary weekly “reunification” visits with her mother, who was unprepared to take her back.

“My mother understood she couldn’t physically hurt me anymore, but every week she would make sure to say things that hurt.”

It took 2 months for Maya to convince her foster parents and social worker that the meetings with her mother had to stop. “I have a hard time trusting people. But I really learned that I have to advocate for myself.”

Now a student and peer educator, Maya’s advice is simple: “Listen to foster kids.”

“In the eyes of the people who were around me, I didn’t know what I was talking about. But I had lived with my mother for 16 years. I knew my mother.”

**Heather Huddleston, 25**



When times got tough for Heather and her family, they moved into a space above their San Francisco Tenderloin neighborhood liquor store. Then a neighbor called Child Protective Services — and Heather and her 6 siblings were scattered throughout California’s foster care system.

Today Heather is employed at a San Francisco nonprofit. She suffers from trust issues. It’s hard for her to dream beyond maintaining her low-income apartment.

But a defining moment came in her junior year of high school, when she failed a test and her teacher made a put-down about foster kids. “Because of that experience specifically, I stick up for myself.”

And for others.

“Change the stigmas you believe. Forty percent of homeless individuals were in foster care at some point. The next time you are on the bus and a homeless person sits next to you, try to understand.”

**Kejon Swift, 20**



Kejon is majoring in industrial design at Solano Community College, with not 1 but 2 mentors. “I want to design cars,” he said. “And own my own company.”

But years of having his belongings regularly stolen have left Kejon distrustful of most people. “To this day, it’s still hard for me to trust.”

His own tool for getting through and beyond his experiences is simple.

“I always paid attention. I thought there may be information that I would need later on.”

For those helping youth, he advised, “Be more open to teaching the children you are working with basic life skills to live on their own.”

### **Justin Martinez, 29**



Justin is a senior at San Francisco State University. For him, education is the key to moving beyond a violent childhood.

Growing up, his father regularly beat his mother. At 14, he and his 3 younger siblings were put into

foster care. “I have episodic memories of the violence I have seen performed on my mother. There are lots of triggers that bring back the memories.”

His way out was first sports, then school.

Today, he lobbies to get bills passed on behalf of the foster care community. “Young people can really use some encouragement.”

He believes the cycle of violence stops with education.

“To prevent it, you have to study it.”