

# **The Foundation for Youth Owning Responsibility, Accepting Accountability . . . and Learning**

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Our ability to promote behavioral change stems from the personal relationships that communicate to youth that our desire is to support them to learn from life lessons in a way that will promote their positive development. If youth lack trust, it is unlikely they will accept responsibility for their actions. Building a relationship rooted in unconditional love, trust, and mutual respect creates a space where youth feel empowered to learn from their mistakes and receive the message that they are accountable for their actions. In contrast, if a lack of trust or positive engagement exists, even if the youth is aware their behavior is unacceptable, they do not feel safe enough to acknowledge their actions and are therefore less likely to take responsibility. It is our hope and desire to lay a pathway for productive change by forming the kind of relationships that enable youth to safely and confidently be receptive to our feedback and (when necessary) our actions, to hold them accountable.

Our youth have consistently expressed the need for staff to teach and encourage them instead of blaming them or deflecting attention away from the problem. During incident investigations, they share that they are more open to accepting responsibility for their actions when there is less judgment. We work to ensure our staff approaches incidents and debriefs with youth by leading with their intentions to teach, guide, influence, and encourage rather than find fault or hold a willful intent to be punitive. We also work to remind staff to bring to consciousness the likelihood of them approaching a specific current situation through the lens of past behaviors of the youth. This limits their biases and allows them to deal more fairly with the current challenges. Critically, it prevents the youth from feeling that, regardless of their efforts to learn, they will always remain trapped by their past behaviors.

In many instances, the youth may lack the emotional or psychological skills to have handled the triggering event more safely or wisely. Youth were simply left with their biological response of fight or flight. In our experience, this is the most natural choice they turn to, due to systemic history of violence or trauma or lack of positive guidance. We often find that in past events where they turned to fighting as an initial response, there was not adequate intervention after the incident. We hope to prevent future incidents by offering youth the opportunity for reflection. Then later, when they are safe and feel calm, we help them build the skill-sets they can draw from in future situations. We know that it is our relationship and strength-based approach—seeing them in the best light—that positions us as the guides they deserve in their lives.