



WELCOME MESSAGE

Dear QPI Champions, partners, young people, families, and friends,

Welcome! I am so glad you are joining us for this year's QPI Champions Conference.

Across the country, child welfare agencies are grappling with a difficult and urgent question: **How do we better support teenagers and the families who care for them?**

Too often, when adolescents struggle in foster care, our systems respond by trying to change the young person- manage their behavior, reduce risk, increase compliance, or find a different placement. But what if we started somewhere else?

What if we asked whether the environments, relationships, policies, and practices surrounding young people are giving them what they need to develop and thrive?

That question is at the heart of this year's conference.

Over the past several years, YLC has had the extraordinary opportunity to work with leading researchers, young people with lived experience, families, caregivers, and child welfare professionals to explore what the science of adolescent development can teach us about foster care. The science gives us tremendous reason for optimism: adolescence is a remarkable period of growth, learning, exploration, and possibility. Relationships, belonging, agency, contribution, and opportunities to learn and grow all matter enormously.

This work is also personal for me. I spent my own adolescence in foster care, at a time when the systems around me too often saw adolescent behavior as something to control or fix rather than trying to understand what young people needed to grow and thrive. When I later began my advocacy with California Youth Connection, I discovered something else that has shaped my work ever since: **teenagers bring extraordinary insight, creativity, heart, and wisdom to conversations about the systems that affect their lives.**

I learned that young people shouldn't simply be invited to tell their stories. They should be partners in identifying problems, imagining what could be different, and building solutions.

One of the things I find so powerful about the developmental research we will explore together is how strongly it reinforces what young people have been telling us for years. Young people need relationships. They need to belong. They need increasing agency and independence. They need opportunities to contribute, explore who they are, make decisions, learn from mistakes, and know there are adults who will stay connected to them through all of it.

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Young people need adults who can see them as whole people rather than as labels or as the worst things they have done on their hardest days.

Sometimes the thing that needs to change is not the young person - it is what surrounds them.

That is what I hope we will explore together at this conference.

And this is not intended to be a conference where we simply listen to presentations and go home with interesting ideas. We want to wrestle together with what the research means for real child welfare practice: how teenagers enter care, how we support the families caring for them, how we respond when things get difficult, how we create opportunities for normal adolescent development, and how agency policies and practices can either support or inadvertently interfere with what young people need.

You will hear from researchers, young people and families, QPI Champions, child welfare leaders, and colleagues who are already putting these ideas into practice. You will also have opportunities to examine your own system and begin identifying changes you can take home.

That is why we have encouraged sites to come as teams. We hope you leave not only inspired, but equipped: with new relationships, practical tools, and a clearer sense of what you can do differently when you return home.

QPI has always been built on the belief that relationships are central to excellent foster care and that the people closest to the work have tremendous wisdom about how to make it better. This conference gives us an opportunity to bring that wisdom together with developmental science and ask a hopeful, practical question:

What could foster care look like if we designed it around what we now know adolescents need to thrive?

I can't wait to explore that question with all of you.

With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jennifer".

Jennifer Rodriguez

Executive Director, Youth Law Center