



# F.O.C.U.S.

## FOCUS ON CRITICAL UNDERLYING STRENGTHS

A quick tool to reframe your perspective with challenging youth

### INTRODUCTION

Thank you for your interest in the F.O.C.U.S. While this tool was originally developed for staff working with highly challenging youth in community-based settings, many others - including parents, mentors and teachers - have found it to be a valuable resource.

### HOW CAN I USE THIS TOOL?

The F.O.C.U.S. (formerly known as the *Relationship Portrait: Youth*) was initially developed as an informal assessment tool; a way to quickly gather and organize information to 1) help staff see the adaptive nature of challenging behavior in youth; 2) shift their focus from deficits to strengths; and 3) provide some guidance for staff to assess their interactions with youth. It was designed to be completed 1-2 time/year to assist with planning.

Over time, it took on a highly practical function. When a staff person was especially frustrated or lost with regard to a young person, they would take five minutes to complete all or part of the F.O.C.U.S. Sometimes, we would sit together and just discuss the questions. The staff person would gain insight into the purpose (and function and value) of the frustrating behavior and how they could shape their own response to build the strengths inherent in it. Even when the insights could not be clearly verbalized, there was nearly always a change in the staff person's demeanor and their effectiveness with the young person. Their behavior, affect, and state-of-mind changed in a way that resulted in a better outcome with the young person.

The F.O.C.U.S. is grounded in four basic concepts that, in my experience, most often impact the behaviors and communication we see in challenging young people.

1. **Adolescence development:** So often, our expectations of young people ignore that they are engaged in developmental tasks that are normal and, in fact, critically important. While our agenda may be good grades and staying in line, the reality is that testing limits (which we must provide), exploring their values (often different than ours), and exploring their sexuality (the range of feelings that make us sexual beings). The F.O.C.U.S. simply asks "How do you see him/her accomplishing these tasks." If we can understand that a YP's behavior may represent their best attempt to accomplish a developmental task (finding belonging in a gang or gaining mastery by wrestling control from you), we can honor the strengths evident in this attempt and help them to discover alternative ways to accomplish the same task.
2. **Where we focus, grows:** If we are to help young people thrive, we must know their unique and enduring individual strengths and offer an alternate mirror to the "you-need-to-be fixed" messages that challenging youth so often experience. The F.O.C.U.S. simply asks "What strengths are evident, even if expressed in ways that trouble me?" and provides a list of possibilities to jump start your perceptions. These are the strengths we will name for each YP, specifically, authentically and in a way they can hear. So we understand what other messages this young person is absorbing, the F.O.C.U.S. asks "What labels does this YP live with?"



3. **We all need to be heard:** In my experience, so many of the most challenging behaviors from young people turn out to be their best attempt to be seen and heard. If we are to be effective, we must ask the simple questions “How does this YP ask for help or seek to be heard?” and “What response is most helpful from me?” The F.O.C.U.S. describes the most common ways YP try to be heard.
4. **We all need boundaries:** When we are going through adolescence, boundaries help us to do our job (exploring who we are) while staying safe. They help us feel cared for and are the landmarks by which we know where we are and who we are. Without them, we can feel like we are in a swamp, with nothing to grab onto and no guideposts to find our way out. The last section of the F.O.C.U.S. asks what those boundaries are, what shared understandings and shared language has been developed to talk about them, and how we will validate strengths even as we hold the YP accountable for their behavior. So often, we bemoan that a YP is opposing us at every turn, then realize that we have never clearly stated or negotiated our expectations, have no shared language for talking about these expectations and have no clear and dependable consequences when the YP predictably crosses the established boundaries (part of their developmental job).

Finally, the F.O.C.U.S. asks that most important question, “How do I know when I am working too hard?” Parenting or working with young people is hard work, to be sure, but at its best, it is *shared* hard work. When we are doing all the work - that is our cue to step back and re-assess our approach.

The spaces allowed for answers are intentionally small, so that the respondent is forced to be clear, concise, and simple. The goal is to clear all the clutter and psychobabble and get to the question. That said, please feel free to utilize these questions in whatever way works for you.

**A caveat:** While this is a valuable tool, it should not be expected to do more than it was designed to do. It is a limited tool designed for quick insights based on some general and practical aspects of youth development and behavior. It makes no promises beyond asking the right questions. What you do with the answers is up to you.

**Your rights:** You are invited to print, copy and use this tool for personal or non-profit purposes. Please retain the copyright notice on all copies. Should you wish to modify this tool in any way, please share your ideas with me. In fact, I would love to hear where and how you have used the F.O.C.U.S. in your work and/or parenting.

Be well,

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Name of YP \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### I. Developmental Tasks

Where/how do I see this YP doing her/his developmental jobs, like... (just notice)
Seeking a sense of belonging?
Exploring his/her impact on the world
Exploring her/his identity
Exploring his/her values
Exploring her/his sexuality
Gaining mastery
Exploring separateness/autonomy
Exploring altruism

**II. What strengths are evident** in this YP, even if expressed in ways that trouble me? What skills and characteristics does this YP use to survive? (In parenthesis, notice what we sometimes call these.)

Humorous (disruptive)	Curious (nosey)	Speaks well
Persistent (obstinate)	Clever (smart aleck)	Creative
Perseveres	Charming (manipulative)	Competent
Perceptive (fresh)	Innovative (up to no good)	_____
Positive outlook (Pollyanna)	Passionate (annoying)	_____
Adaptable (doormat)	Assertive (bossy)	_____
Self-confident (cocky)	In control (controlling)	_____
Self motivated (not team player)	Inner directed (uncooperative)	_____
Resourceful (conniving)	Cares for siblings	_____
Loyal (protects wrong people)	Has close friends	_____
Determined (stubborn)	Has key caring adult	_____

**What labels** does this YP live with from adults... peers... self...?

**III. Seeking to be seen & heard** (you need only complete those that apply)

<b>How does this YP ask for help or seek to be heard?</b>	<b>What response is most helpful from me?</b>
<u>Asks</u> or communicates directly	
<u>Demands</u> – with or without clarity	
<u>Shows</u> through actions – with or without clutter/clarity	
Tries to <u>get it</u> in other ways	
<u>Complains</u> or talks about something related or tell related stories/observations	
<u>Prevents</u> it – seems to undermine, often just before “success” looms	

**IV. Boundaries: In what ways do I help to keep this young person safe**

What are the boundaries/expectations	
What is the shared language used to talk about expectations/boundaries?	
What is your <u>shared</u> understanding of consequences? How do I know they are shared?	
What strengths do I validate when holding accountable?	
How do I know when I am “working too hard”?	