

Best Practices: child welfare journalism

Working with lived experience

Authored by **Dylan Cohen** for
Spotlight:Child Welfare



SPOTLIGHT:
Child Welfare

Why Best Practices

‘In J-school, we’re taught to go straight to the people at the center of an issue, closest to the story, and make space for those voices [...] we have a lot of learning to do.’

- A journalist from [Navigating the Child Welfare System](#): a Workshop Series for Journalists

Media coverage on the child welfare system continues to grow, which means more connections between reporters and folks impacted by the system. More than ever, folks with **lived experience** are being sought for their ideas, expertise, and opinions about how the system could look different.

Coverage is important. Good reporting sheds light on the often overlooked and out-of-focus child welfare system. It can spark critical conversations, motivate policy changes and give voice to people who are too often excluded from public dialogue. Conversely, journalists too often make mistakes in this reporting space. Advocates hear too many stories of journalists overstepping boundaries, misrepresenting sources, and leaving folks traumatized. This resource intends to provide a framework for journalists as they interview sources directly impacted by the system — families who’ve had their children removed and youth who’ve spent time in care.

Lived Experience:
Having personal, direct, first-hand knowledge of the issue at hand. In this case, the youth and family members affected by the child welfare system.

This resource will help you deepen your reporting and relationships with marginalized sources.



Author: [Dylan Cohen](#)

A child welfare organizer, alumni of care, and passionate systems thinker is dedicated to creating a better system. He’s been interviewed by dozens of journalists across the country and has seen stories unfold from both sides of the microphone, working as a Youth Media Fellow with The Discourse and as a community organizer with [Fostering Change](#).

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A collaborative journalism project that aims to deepen and improve reporting on B.C.’s child-welfare system. The project was initiated by The Discourse and our team includes journalists reporting for APTN, Black Press, The Discourse, National Observer, The Runner, Star Vancouver, The Tyee and Vancouver Courier.

Tips for better reporting on child welfare

1. Bring nuance: do your homework & avoid trauma porn

Reporting on child welfare is tough work. Journalists appear to jump into this complex space without first building relationships with people in the system or on the ground. This can result in sensational coverage that damages our community.

Tips

- **Do your research:** before you ask a source basic questions about an issue, explore existing resources.
- **Tell your sources** who else you're interviewing, so they can see that you're working to get a range of perspectives. Ask who else you should talk to.
- **Be mindful of the language** you use to identify someone. It's easy to get stuck with a label like 'foster-kid' or 'unfit parent'. Advocates point out that news stories get used against parents in custody disputes.
- **Remind sources** that anything published is on the public record forever.

"What's the worst thing that happened to you while you were in care?" Is never a question a trauma victim should be asked, yet we hear it too often.

Children's Advocate's offices, community organizations, and other stakeholders produce resources that break down systemic issues. These are great jumping points to a personal story.

2. Be a human first, a journalist second*

Interviews can be an incredibly intense experience, especially when folks are asked to revisit traumatic experiences. Sources are eager to be heard. It's easy to imagine how someone might be heartbroken if, after being interviewed, their perspective does not end up in a story.

What reporters might not realize is that **after a tragic event happens in our community, we're often descended upon** by people whom we have no relationships with who are asking us very invasive questions. It feels like they are prioritizing being the first to tell this story over the needs of our community.

Tips

- **Be transparent** about deadlines, your reporting process, and how you choose quotes.
- **Keep sources updated** on the date you might publish and the story's status.
- **Be clear about your motivations** and the value you bring to your source.
- **Remember that your questions can unintentionally resurface trauma** — If the question is inappropriate for your family, it's inappropriate for your source.

As you work, stay transparent and committed to ethical and fair reporting. Your relationships with your sources are important, respect that!

*this tip first appeared in Dart Center's *Essential Tips for Interviewing Children*, see appendix for more.

3. Be open to unconventional reporting practice

Sometimes standard journalism practices won't work for marginalized people who've never been listened to. Reporting in this space means changing standard practices and pushing your peers to do the same. Avoid doing things just because that's the way they're always done.



Tips

- **Offer to call someone after** you've drafted a story to explain how you're quoting them. This way you ensure that your story is accurate and that your source is fairly represented.
- **Follow up** and verify personal details with a source. It's easy to misspeak and make mistakes when retelling a personal trauma. When you follow up for clarification, you'll get more accurate reporting.
- **Invite sources** to share their ideas for changing the system, not just their problems with it.
- **Go out of your way** to meet sources where they're at. Ask them where they want to be interviewed, and be open to multiple meetups. If you have location preferences, explain why.
- **The tighter your deadline, the more you should be careful** of the source you're using. Hasty reporting results in bigger mistakes.
- **Ask your source what they need** to feel safe.
- **Be open to an interview without a person's first-person history.** A source might want to keep interviews impersonal, talking about a common experience among their peers rather than their own trauma. For example, ask 'What's it like to be a youth from care?' instead of 'What happened to you?'

4. Choose the right source, and involve their support system

Questions asked by journalists can bring up a lot of hard emotions. Are you reaching out to youth who are isolated and out of touch with community? Reporters should understand that trauma resurfaces when we tell stories, and can often leave vulnerable folks alone and damaged after a story is released.



Tips

- **The best sources** have a rich network of formal supports, that they can consult with before and after the interview.
- **Consider inviting your source** to bring along someone they trust to interview(s).
- **Ask community organizations and trusted leaders** for connections if you're looking to speak with someone who has a specific kind of lived child-welfare experience (e.g. a youth who is accessing post-secondary supports). This way you can be sure that they're already connected to supports.
- **Lean on your research skills!** Provide your source with a few resources that they can use for post-interview support, like service-providers and local resources.

"You don't check on someone's pulse, say, **'Wow, you're in trouble,'** and then leave."

- co-contributor Lilia Zharieva

5. Lead with informed consent

Journalists hold a lot of power to tell stories, often interviewing sources that are used to being ignored, disrespected, and muzzled. This power dynamic is inherent to a journalist-source relationship, and it's important to keep in mind. Many folks are so desperate for the system to change that they may see your interview request as their golden ticket. If a source consents to an interview, how can you be sure it's not under duress?

Tips

- **Explain how the story will live on.** Will they be easily identifiable as someone involved in the system in an online search? What long-term impacts might that have on them?

"No one talks to survivors about the impact of telling your story—what it does to you, what it ultimately means—because we tend to think we live in an ideal world where, **when I tell my story, everyone will be moved with compassion. We all know that's not true.**"

- Sophie Otiende for NonProfit Quarterly



- **Keep checking in!** The best practice is one that leads with consent and continues as the conversation digs deeper.
- **Make space to say no.** Ask them what kind of boundaries they would like to set for the interview. What questions are out of bounds?

Remember, consent is an ongoing process and requires that you as a journalist consistently make space for your source to say no.

6. Follow up

A story doesn't end after publication. Your first story with a source could be the start of an ongoing relationship where you both benefit. Invest in them like you would any other important reporting relationship.

Tips

- **After the interview**, let them know how to reach you with any questions, lingering thoughts, or if something about the story changes over time.
- **After publishing**, share the story with your sources. Ask them for feedback about the process and the final piece.
- **Give them your editor's phone number** in case they have feedback that they're not comfortable sharing directly.

A day in a reporter's notebook might be one of the biggest moments in a youth's life.



Existing resources

1. Advice from Sources

The Discourse: [How reporters should approach stories about vulnerable youth](#)

This article, also authored by Dylan Cohen, shares considerations about ethical storytelling and covering child welfare stories and sources.

The Discourse: [Newsletter: A survivor's advice for journalists reporting on #MeToo](#)

A Q&A with Rose, a source who decided to stop doing interviews after several conversations with a journalist. Good analysis on trust and the importance of remembering humanity in the work.

The Discourse: [‘Nothing about us, without us’—what are the best practices for media reporting on child welfare?](#)

Brielle Morgan's summary of feedback shared at a gathering of twenty-five folks with diverse connections to the child welfare system.

Former youth in care: [Youth Panel on Media Coverage of Child Welfare](#)

From The Discourse's [Navigating the Child Welfare System: A Workshop Series for Journalists](#) This four person panel spoke with reporters about their experiences and what they wanted to see happen differently.

NonProfit Quarterly: [The Ethics of Nonprofit Storytelling: Survivor Porn and Parading Trauma](#)

Amy Costello tells us how survivor porn and trauma narratives require careful considerations and nuanced solutions focuses.

2. Tip Sheets & Reporting Guides

Berkeley Media Studies Group: [The child welfare system in U.S. news - What's missing?](#)

This April 2019 report analyzed 3,522 news stories and found their coverage focused mostly on specific instances of abuse. They also found that most sources quoted were from the Criminal Justice system, instead of folks with lived experience, advocates, or others.

Dart Center: [Covering Children & Trauma](#)

This 2006 resource comes from experienced child welfare reporter Ruth Teichroab. "When children are victims of violence, journalists have a responsibility



to report the truth with compassion and sensitivity. Kids aren't mini-adults; they deserve special consideration when they end up in the news."

Dart Center: [Essential Tips for Interviewing Children](#)

An informative resource which inspired one of our tips: 'Be a human first, a journalist second.'

National Center for Injury Prevention and Control Division of Violence Prevention in the US: [Suggested Practices for Journalists Reporting on Child Abuse and Neglect](#)

This resource highlights tips -- everything from language to use and avoid, questions to ask policy experts, and data sources for reporters covering the child welfare system in the U.S.

Solutions Journalism: [22 Questions that 'Complicate the Narrative'](#)

"Conversation techniques, interview questions, and stellar story examples born from a conflict mediation training—for journalists."

WITNESS: [Interviewing Survivors of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence](#)

This comprehensive guide covers planning, conducting, and distributing interviews. Sections encourage the need for journalists to do self-reflection, overviews of good practices, location tips, and good and bad questions examples.