



# Building Trust and Felt Safety with Children and Youth

Human connection is essential. We all need to feel like we belong. A child or youth who has experienced out-of-home care may be slow to trust. Allowing them time and space to share about their lives can help create a feeling of safety. However, sharing their feelings, opening up about their story, and learning to trust others will need to be earned over time. It cannot be expected to be given easily or rushed.

Youth who have been in out-of-home care are often accustomed to discussing their past with professionals and adults. They may have rehearsed answers that don't reveal much beneath the surface. Many have built protective walls to shield themselves from future hurt and may avoid vulnerability as a way to protect themselves.

The activities included in this packet are designed to encourage engagement in authentic conversations. They are designed to provide an easier way to spark meaningful conversations, rather than simply sitting down to talk about problems.

It's important to remember that this connection work should always be voluntary, with youth having the right to opt out at any time. It may take months or even years for a strong bond of trust to form. Continue to show up, no matter what.

**Coalition for Children, Youth & Families**

414-475-1246

[info@coalitionforccyf.org](mailto:info@coalitionforccyf.org)

# Table of Contents

<b>Supporting Identity Formation .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Connecting Through Music .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Soundtrack to My Life .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Expression Through Poetry .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Recognizing Grief .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Body Map Activity .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Life Timeline Activity .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Healthy Support Systems .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Other Resources for Building Connections .....</b>	<b>13</b>

## **Supporting Identity Formation**











For a youth to heal from their past losses, they need to feel safe. Feelings of safety will appear in secure, nurturing relationships where children are allowed to express their grief. Adults play an important role in providing protection, safety, and a sense of belonging.

Many youth often build up an armor due to past hurt and may feel safer relying on no one. Personal identity typically begins forming at the age of 13. This can often be the most challenging time for a young person, and a background of trauma can make this time even more difficult.

Part of developing trust with youth who have had relational trauma is helping them answer the important question of “Who am I?” The activities that follow will help them recognize their attributes and interests and boost self-esteem.

## Connecting Through Music

### Soundtrack to My Life

-  My favorite type of music is \_\_\_\_\_.
- I like this genre because \_\_\_\_\_.
-  My favorite song is \_\_\_\_\_.
- I love it because \_\_\_\_\_.
-  My favorite musician or band: \_\_\_\_\_.
-  I play this song when I'm happy: \_\_\_\_\_.
-  A song I play when I'm sad: \_\_\_\_\_.
-  A song I play when I'm angry is \_\_\_\_\_.
-  A song that makes me think of summer: \_\_\_\_\_.
-  A song that reminds me of school: \_\_\_\_\_.
-  A song I like to dance to is \_\_\_\_\_.
-  A song that I like to play loud: \_\_\_\_\_.

*“Art is how we decorate space,  
music is how we decorate time.”  
— Jean-Michel Basquiat*

Almost everyone likes listening to music. A certain song can instantly change your mood or send you back in time. Lyrics in songs can provide an emotional release. Additionally, music can enhance confidence, lower heart rate, and alleviate muscle tension.

For this activity, adults are encouraged to bring a few songs that hold special significance for them and share why they are meaningful. Sharing songs that have special meaning for you can enhance emotional intimacy between family members.

## Soundtrack to My Life



My favorite type of music is \_\_\_\_\_.

I like this genre because \_\_\_\_\_.



My favorite song is \_\_\_\_\_.

I love it because \_\_\_\_\_.



My favorite musician or band: \_\_\_\_\_.



I play this song when I'm happy: \_\_\_\_\_.



A song I play when I'm sad: \_\_\_\_\_.



A song I play when I'm angry is \_\_\_\_\_.



A song that makes me think of summer: \_\_\_\_\_.



A song that reminds me of school: \_\_\_\_\_.



A song I like to dance to is \_\_\_\_\_.



A song that I like to play loud: \_\_\_\_\_.

## Expression Through Poetry

**I Am Poem**

I am \_\_\_\_\_  
(your name)

I wonder \_\_\_\_\_  
(something you are curious about)

I want \_\_\_\_\_  
(what you hope for)

I feel \_\_\_\_\_  
(how do you feel today)

I am \_\_\_\_\_  
(a word that describes your personality)

I worry \_\_\_\_\_  
(something you are concerned about)

I cry \_\_\_\_\_  
(what makes you sad)

I am \_\_\_\_\_  
(another word that describes you)

I dream \_\_\_\_\_  
(a wish for the future)

I try \_\_\_\_\_  
(something I want to get better at)

I am \_\_\_\_\_  
(your name)

This activity can help youth develop a sense of identity and may be the key to getting them started on a therapeutic writing path, if they are inspired to move on to journaling or writing poems. Adults are encouraged to come prepared with a completed “I Am” poem about themselves, or may choose to complete one at the same time as the child.

This poem does not need to be finished all at once, as it may be overwhelming. It’s okay to do a few lines and come back to it at another time. This activity can be revisited as the child ages, allowing them to recognize how people change over time and understand that identity is not static.

# I Am Poem

I am \_\_\_\_\_  
(your name)

I wonder \_\_\_\_\_  
(something you are curious about)

I want \_\_\_\_\_  
(what you hope for)

I feel \_\_\_\_\_  
(how do you feel today)

I am \_\_\_\_\_  
(a word that describes your personality)

I worry \_\_\_\_\_  
(something you are concerned about)

I cry \_\_\_\_\_  
(what makes you sad)

I am \_\_\_\_\_  
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I dream \_\_\_\_\_  
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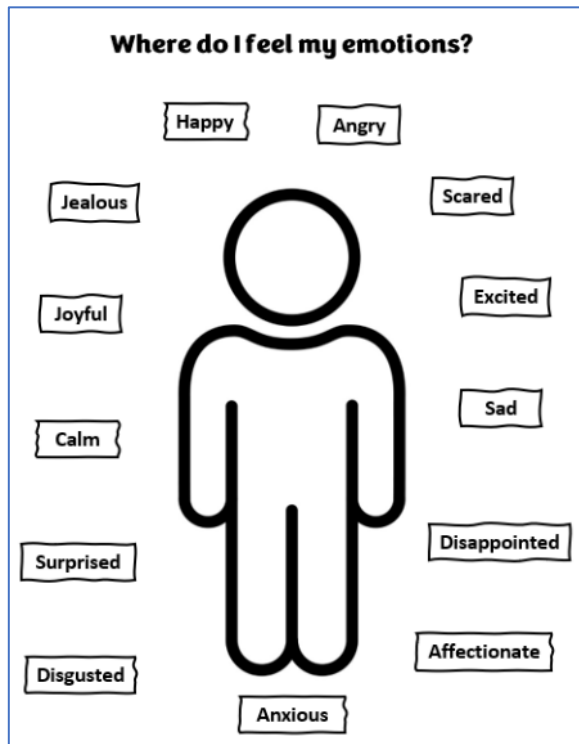
## Recognizing Grief

Ambiguous loss is a loss with no clear ending. The grieving process feels frozen in time, and there is no closure. Children may feel some of their grief consciously, but much of it is buried deeply. Kids demanding to be seen may exhibit pain-based behaviors. The challenge is that these behaviors can present as actions that are disobedient, defiant, or disrespectful. These behaviors may include aggression, sadness, depression, running away, self-harm, lying, or even numbing themselves with drugs or alcohol. These actions help youth maintain a safe distance from others. When you don't know who to trust, you keep everyone away.

Youth often have an overwhelming sense of guilt and shame. They may mistakenly believe that things that happened (or didn't happen) were within their control or that things that went wrong were their fault. Youth often have difficulty going back and talking about losses because they can't recall specific details. They may have even blocked memories to survive stressful situations. The following activities will help you guide teens in identifying their grief and recognizing key events in their lives.



## Body Map Activity

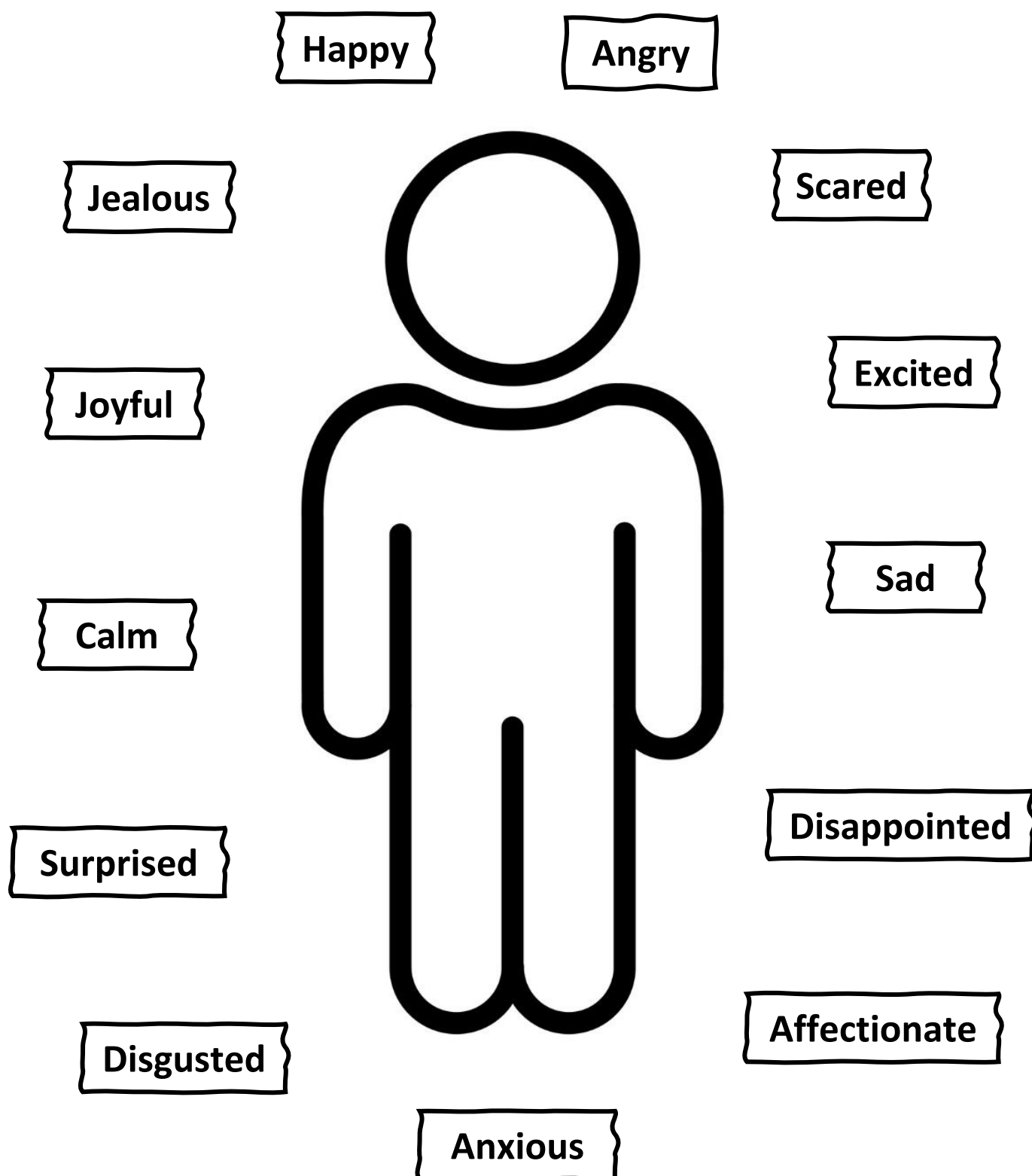


Children and youth often lack the inner voice that tells them to walk away or the language to express to adults that they are about to erupt. The purpose of this activity is to have the youth identify places in their body where they hold trauma or where trauma triggers present first. By noticing where these feelings start in their bodies, they can use these physical sensations as warning signs for strong emotions.

This activity could start with a simple talking point such as “When I’m mad, it starts in my head, but then I feel it in my chest and hands.”

Younger children can choose colors to represent emotions and draw on their body picture to show where they feel those emotions. Older youth may want to match the listed emotions to the area of the body by drawing a line from the word to the place. Be sure to make clear that there are no right or wrong answers.

# Where do I feel my emotions?



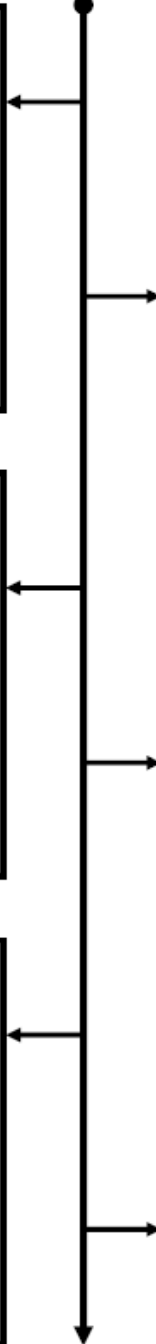
## Life Timeline Activity

TIMELINE	

This activity can help youth clarify life events, identify losses, and discuss past trauma. This could start with their earliest memory or just a chosen segment of their life. It can include happy memories, sad memories, or a combination of both. They can write words or draw pictures.

One example of using this timeline is writing down all the places a youth has lived and the age they were when they moved. At some point, they may be ready to make a timeline of traumatic events. This can be a painful process, and it's imperative that the youth set the pace for this activity. Be careful not to "correct" the youth's timeline, even if it's something as simple as pointing out that an age isn't right. These are the youth's memories and perceptions, and need to be honored.

# **TIMELINE**



## Healthy Support Systems

You may find that the child or youth is too trusting or, alternatively, may appear skeptical of new people they meet. It's important to help them develop the skills to evaluate relationships and recognize whether someone is supportive and safe.

The following questions are designed to help guide thoughtful reflection. Youth can use them to consider their interactions with a wide range of people, including family members, old friends, new friends, social welfare professionals, coworkers, past and current teachers, and friends and relatives of their adoptive or biological family.

### **Things to Ask Yourself:**

1. Are the motives and intentions of this person in my best interest?
2. Is this person authentic? Are they being their true self with me?
3. What am I learning from this person?
4. Does this person make me feel good about myself?
5. Do I feel empowered by the support this person gives me?
6. Do I trust this person? Should I?

Ultimately, unless the person is unsafe, it's essential to give the child or youth space to decide whether they want to maintain a connection, move closer, or establish some distance in a relationship. Parental or caregiver support can help guide these decisions, but empowering youth to make thoughtful choices is key to their development.

## **Other Resources for Building Connections**

### **Tip Sheets:**

[Helping Children in Care Build Trusting Relationships](#)

[Grief & Loss: Making Space for Healing](#)

[Challenging Behaviors May Be a Sign of Grieving](#)

[Recognizing Trauma Triggers](#)

[Supporting Children Who Have Experienced Trauma](#)

[Helping Children Cope with Loss](#)

### **Champion Classrooms :**

[Creating Felt Safety](#)

[Blocked Care: What to Do When You Run Out of Compassion](#)

[The Many Faces of Anxiety: Responding to Fears, Worries, and Panic](#)

[Creating Space for Healing](#)

[Everyday Healing: Naming Adversity and Loss](#)

[Attachment and Bonding Below the Surface](#)

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