

Reproductive Health Rights Podcast: Youth Perspective  
October 2018

[Music]

**Kelly Meehleib:** Welcome to the Judicial Council's Center for Families, Children & the Courts podcast series on juvenile law. Recent law changes require judges and caseworkers to address reproductive health rights in case planning for foster youth. We'll be talking to a former foster youth talking about her experiences learning about reproductive health rights and what adults can do better.

**Krystal:** I didn't know anything. I never knew we can have condoms. I never knew that, you know, they were obligated to transport us if, you know, we have, we have those types of rights. I didn't know that. I didn't know that I was able to go to my same doctor that I feel comfortable with versus going to, you know, whatever doctor that group home normally goes to. That's not something, like, who would ask that? That's not even something we would think would, we wouldn't even think we have the right to that.

**Kelly Meehleib:** This is Krystal, a former foster youth in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. She is 24-years-old, a CSEC survivor, and a new mom.

**Krystal:** You know, you go to a group home and you go by their program. That's just kind of how it is, you know. So, those types of things, it's like, like, when was somebody going talk to me about that? When was that supposed to happen? Who was supposed to do that? Like, that's not, even to this day, I'm, me thinking back, like, where was that supposed to come into play? You know.

Because even dealing with social workers and probation officers. And, even for them, like, and this is just me looking from their perspective, they deal a whole lot. They have a whole lot of other issues and concerns to address to where they probably didn't even think about sexual education being a priority. Because there's so many other things that they have to deal with. Their caseloads are humongous. They get thrown off. They probably get overwhelmed themselves.

I can only imagine me dealing with me. Me being a probation officer or a social worker to a youth that was as rebellious as I was, I can only imagine how heavy that is. So then, also trying to deal with the behavioral part, the law part, you know, getting their services, and then, you know, that, I just don't think there's enough attention on it, and that's why they wouldn't think to address it because no one's talking about it. Today's a new day though and today we're talking about it. And today, you got youth like me, you got workers like Val and Luciana who going to make sure that this word gets out to youth in care. This, this wasn't happening during my time in care, it wasn't.

[Music]

**Valerie Esquivel:** My name is Valerie Esquivel and I'm the Program Associate at the National Center for Youth Law. I support the Los Angeles Reproductive Health Equity Project for foster youth here in Los Angeles. And, what that is it's a partnership of adult advocates and young people working together to really dismantle the systemic barriers that get in the way of young peoples' access to sexual and reproductive health. And, our goal is really to reduce the unintended pregnancies that young people in foster care experience. And with that to really increase their access to information and to resources and bring people together to really understand what their reproductive health rights are, how to act, you know, how to make sure that they're exercising them.

And, one of the, one of the, an important thing for us was to create a Youth Advisory Board to really inform the work that we are doing and to help us think through strategies to best get to young people that are currently in care. And so, Krystal joined our Youth Advisory Board when we, when we launched. And, Krystal is a very determined, action-driven young woman. When I met Krystal and we were doing the interview, she had ideas about what she wanted to do already.

That's exactly what, you know, what we were looking for. Young people who are really passionate about this topic, who have lived experiences that how, can help us think through: What are some of the best practices? How can we better support young people?

[Music]

**Kelly Meehleib:** So, there's a lot of conversations statewide about the disproportionate rate at which youth in foster care become pregnant and parenting. Why do you think that is?

**Krystal:** Well, I think it's a few different reasons. I think that, for sure, lack of knowledge is one. Like, a lot of us not being aware of not only our rights, like our rights have a big thing to do with it. But, I think it has a lot to do with the lack of conversation about, you know, just sexual education and just, you know, just resources and different things like that to where, you know, when you know better, you do better. If you don't know better, then you're not going to do better. So, it's like, if you don't know what to do when you're in a, you know, "oops" situation, like, "Uh oh, this happened." Or "This is going on in my body. I don't know what to do." Your, I mean, it's just going to create more and more problems.

Like, and then it's a vicious cycle because it's not, the cycle's not being broken anywhere. You know, year after year, youth after youth, the conversations are still not happening, the education is still not being, what's the word I'm looking for? Like, it's still not reaching, you know, the youth, whether they're in care or not in care, youth in general. I think that plays a huge part.

I think, you know, just a lot of other system, systematic things that go on, just having a lot of other issues to focus on, sexual education is not really, like, the first thing on everyone's list.

Then, you know, us as a youth, we're more worried about, you know: When they were going to get our home pass? When our visits are going to be? When court is. When are we going go back home? When are we going to? You know, there's so many more things that are, you know, bigger in the picture versus just that. So, I think it just gets overlooked a lot.

When it comes to, like, being pregnant and parenting, like I said, definitely, you know, knowing what to do if that situation happens. But, I think that a lot of us in foster care, myself included, because when I was younger, I wanted a baby so bad, you know. And, I'm not being, and it's like when I was thinking about how much I wanted a baby, I'm not thinking of it in a reality, you know, type-of-setting. I'm thinking of it as, *Oh my God. It's a cute baby. It's like a baby doll.* You want to dress it up. It just looks so cute. You don't really have a sens-, as a youth, you don't have a sense of reality of what it's like to actually be a parent. You just think it's cute on Instagram or on social media, you know.

And then, a lot of times, and this is what I mean by myself included, you know, sometimes youth like me go through the system and we don't feel unconditional love from anyone. You have a certain void and sometimes we feel like having a baby is going to fix that. We're going to always have somebody that no matter what, they're going to love me regardless. They're not going to go nowhere, regardless. No matter what happens, no matter where I end up in life, that's still going to be my kid, I'm still going be that kid's mom, and that's my permanent love that I should have been getting from mom, dad, auntie, uncle, cousin, sister, whoever. You know. But, you're trying to, like, you think that having a baby is going to just make you feel loved and valued.

And then also, I have a gang of reasons. Because another thing could be, you know, you just not feeling like you have a purpose in life. Like, for me, I felt like, you know, it was just like, what am I here for? Like, I'm going through all this shenanigans, I'm going through the system, I'm going through this. Like, why, what is the point of all this? You know, like, what am I living for? So, sometimes, you know, people also feel like sometimes, you know, having a baby is going give them purpose and give them a reason to, you know, do better in life, you know. And, sometimes for some people, yeah, that is the case.

You know, like, for me, me getting pregnant when I got pregnant, having my baby, it happened when it was supposed to because I'm in a better place mentally-wise. Had I had the baby I wanted a few years ago when I was, you know, still in. You know, I did say I was a CSEC survivor, so, I'm a just consider that the "lifestyle." You know, when I was a part of the lifestyle, pretty much, and me having a baby, I would have been putting my baby through the same cycle I was in because mentally, I wasn't ready, financially, I wasn't ready. And, I literally just had no sense of reality of what it really is like to be a parent. And, although I am still learning today, but I'm in a much better place than I was when I was 14-15, trying to have a baby, you know, for all the wrong reasons.

[Music]

I, I was always, like, I went to Planned Parenthood on my own a lot throughout that lifestyle period. And, honestly, I really didn't, didn't even start going to Planned Parenthood until the first time I was, like, attacked during lifestyle, where I was raped, and they didn't use protection. And, I was like freaking out. And, the pimp that I was messing with around that time is the one that made sure that I went to go get checked and stuff like that.<sup>1</sup> And so then, that was, kind of, like, my first time ever really, you know. Pimps aren't good people all the time because what they do but, you know, in that situation, you know, he is the reason that I know what Planned Parenthood is, and how I, kind of, knew to go get checked and stuff. Because of the situation, I was just so nervous of just getting pregnant, of catching something, like, and so that was, like, my first-time kind of, like, learning how to check up on myself.

And so, then, once I went the first time, I liked it. Like, when I went, it made me just feel, like, I don't know, I guess I just opened my eyes to a perspective that I never paid attention to, which is my sexual and re-, reproductive health, and I never really thought about it too much. So, that's kind of how I started. And then after that I would, like, regularly go get checked ev-, I would, like, literally go either once a month or once every other month.

Just because when I started going to Planned Parenthood and I was being honest with them about certain, I was being honest and then not. So, you know, cause you can't do all that sometimes, but when I started just learning about infections and just different things that I'm able to get even, even if I use protection. You know, just different, different condo- using like, if you're having, having multiple sex partners for one, that's a problem because you're dealing with different people, different sizes, different things going on. And then on top of the fact, when you use different types of condoms, the materials are different, the lubrications are different. Sometimes it can irritate stuff, you know, it can irritate things. If you don't stay consistent to one type of condom, one. You know, stuff can happen, we're girls, were sensitive down there. So, a lot of things can happen and those were things that I was experiencing, but didn't know what it was, and I just disregard it because I had other things to worry about.

So, when had I went to Planned Parenthood and, you know, they just saw how young I was and stuff like that, there was a girl who was, kind of, just counseling me and, kind of, just, kind of, put me up on game about stuff that she probably thought I didn't know and she was right. And after that, I would just go regularly whether I had, whether somebody had did something to me or not, just because I was aware of infections being able to happen just for having multiple sex partners and that kind of stuff. So, I did start, that's, I have, like, check upped myself regularly. And, I always practice safe, safe sex, even the lifestyle I don't play that stuff.

[Music]

---

<sup>1</sup> Planned Parenthood notes that they follow all reporting requirements and provide annual trainings to staff on human trafficking as well as mandatory reporting.

**Kelly Meehleib:** Did anyone counsel you or talk to you about whether or not to keep Chloe?

**Krystal** Majority of everybody told me not to keep her. But, because every, you have to remember, like, me being a CSEC survivor, for anyone who doesn't know what CSEC is, it's Commercially Sexually Exploited Children. And, for a long time when I was in the lifestyle, a lot of people didn't look at youth like me as victims. I didn't even look at myself as a victim. I'm still working on looking at myself as a victim because in that lifestyle, you don't feel like you're a victim, you know. I, for sure, did not. I felt like I was doing what I wanted to do, you know, not understanding the manipulation that I was under, you know, by men and just by other environments.

Because of that lifestyle and because everybody knows of the type of person Krystal is, like, everybody knew, you know, Krystal's in the streets, Krystal's been running, Krystal was always running away from group homes. Like, I was just, like I said, the hottest mess ever, right? So, people were more so afraid for the baby, like, they're just like, "No, you're not ready." Like, the, everybody was just scared of her being, like, to the point like, you know, "I'll take her." Some people were actually volunteering to take my baby before I even had her, you know. Just because they were they, you know, no one, no one really believed in me. No one really believed that.

Actually now, I'm not gonna say nobody because some people did. Some people were like, "Yes, this is gonna be life-changing for you," you know. "This is what you need," you know, "It's good timing."

But, majority of people were like, "No, Kyrstal," like, "I will pay for the abortion, like, "I will pay for, I will take you and pay for." A couple people, actually, offered to pay for the abortion, and those same people who offered to pay are the most happiest that she's here. It's the craziest thing.

But, people did try to convince me not to cause they felt like I wasn't ready. But, I feel like I made the best decision cause her being here is what I needed, you know. Regardless to what everybody else feels or thinks, it was the best decision for me. So, I'm happy I kept her, thank you very much.

**Kelly Meehleib:** So, you've been a mom now for about eight months, right, you said? Okay. So, what have you learned about yourself through the process of becoming a parent?

**Krystal** I just think I learned to value myself more. I think it allowed me to know, like, people always talk about love yourself, first, love yourself first. And, I feel like I never really knew, like, how do I know if I'm loving myself? How do I know? I feel like I never really knew that.

But, like since I had her, I feel, like, it's, I have a way more clear understanding of loving myself. I know, you know, I think I have a better understanding of thinking before I act, thinking before I

speak, thinking before I move. You know, I just think, you know, it just taught me a lot of the things that I feel like people have always seen in me, but I've never seen in myself.

I've learned that I have a whole 'nother level of, of, of ambition that I've tapped into. Like, I've always, I had goals before, I've set goals before, but I'm more determined being a mom. But yeah, I think more so, it's just love and patience and, you know, just more thoughtful thinking, honestly.

I think my, what I found challenging is feeling like my baby is safe when I'm not around her. Regardless to whether people are, people who I trust are watching her and not, we all parent differently. And I, you may parent and, you know, take care of a baby a different way than me. And, I want you to do it my way, I don't want you to do it your way cause it's my baby, not your baby, so I want you to do it Krystal's way. So, that's, that's challenging.

Being away from her, you know, right now, because I'm in school is definitely challenging. But, I feel like it's better for me to do it now while she's younger cause she notices that I'm not there, but she'll notice it more and when she's older. So, I rather knock this out now and then be able to have more time with her later.

And, what's rewarding is just being able to just watch her grow, watch her learn things. She says mom right now. Like, she's literally calling me mom, it's crazy. Like, you're not even eight months yet, hold on.

[Laughter]

So, like, she's literally, you know, just say little words. Just watching just the beauty of her developing is rewarding.

Honestly, I feel like Chloe kind of gave me my family back. Whereas a lot of people in my family who would not fool with me, when I say they would not deal with me cause I'm a hot mess, remember? They would not deal with me. Wouldn't talk to me around, I wouldn't get invited places, like, I just didn't even, I prayed a whole new family for myself of non-blood-related people. So, ever since I had Chloe, it's, like, everybody just came off the woodworks, like, where y'all been at? You know. But, they're here today. And, like, I say all the time, if I have to go through what I went through 20 more times for Chloe to get all the love and stuff that I didn't get from them, I will go through it over and over again. But, Chloe for sure has definitely, like, allowed me to experience what it's like to have a family because everyone is, like, engaging us now and stuff like that. So, that's a big reward for sure.

Oh yeah, one more thing. Hold up. One more thing. Because my, you know, my mother is still struggling with, you know, drugs and recovering, and since I've had my daughter, she's gotten a whole lot of act right, okay. She got her some act right juice because, you know, she want to be in, you know, it's like I feel like she's a blessing to her as well. Because her, you know, her

struggling with addiction is not easy. Prostitution's not like a drug addiction, but it's still an addiction that I had to wind off of, so I look at it as the same.

And, so, for my mom, Chloe being here, I know that a lot of times she blames herself for the way my life has been. And, that causes her to do more drugs cause it helps her escape that guilt trip that she goes on. And, I feel like now that Chloe is here, it kind of allows her a platform to do the things that she should have did for me or, kind of, make up for the things where she feel like she messed up on.

And, for that like, you know, she's been real sober lately.

**Kelly Meehleib:** So, Krystal, what are your plans for the near future? Where do you see yourself, what do you see yourself doing in the next three to five years?

**Krystal:** Well, I just look, talked about this the other day. I got some new goals, right? So, first, I was going to school for massage therapy last year

**Krystal** Okay. But then, I got pregnant and I got really, really sick my first six and a half months. I couldn't get it, I just, I could not function. I was throwing up every other minute, it was horrible.

So, I was unable to continue with my schooling. And, right now, the school, I want to go back, but they're under, they're changing up the school, so, I wait for them to open back up. So, since I had my baby, the school was still not open, so I couldn't return. So, I had to do something else, you know. So, that's when I got into the skin therapy program. It's still the same field, same industry; I can always, you know, go back and forth between the two.

But, I have new goals, like I just said. And so, my first goal right now is I'm working towards my aesthetician license. And, it's only two semesters, thank God. So, it's only fall in spring, so by summer next year, honey, guess who will be licensed? Krystal will be licensed.

Now, anyways, back to the real stuff. I have new goals. So, kind of, like what I want to do is I really have high desires of create, of starting my own skincare line. I really, I been playing around in my own kitchen, kind of, just making, like, natural bath bombs that are healthy for the pH balance and making different body butters and body scrubs. And, I haven't started making soaps and candles yet, but I do want to make customized candles and soaps. But, I do want to start my own skincare line, mostly just like body butters and just, you know, just different stuff like that and bath bombs and lotions and stuff.

But, I also want to eventually, once I get my feet, you know, wet with all that, I want to start a non-profit. And, not only would I like to create life skills workshops for youth in care, I would also like to provide skincare education workshops and skincare services for free to youth in care.

Cause I don't feel like that's really something that we, on top of a lot of other topics, we don't talk about.

It's a little bit of a whole lot. I don't have it all figured out of exactly what my nonprofit, what my nonprofit would provide, but it's definitely going be using what I got pretty much. And, to also just be what I wish I had in care.

[Music]

**Kelly Meehleib:** The Judicial Council's Center for Families, Children & the Courts works with courts around the state to improve outcomes for children and families in both the juvenile justice and child welfare systems. For more information, please visit our website at [www.courts.ca.gov](http://www.courts.ca.gov) under Programs for Families and Children.