

YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

Universal Healing Through a Reimagined System of Care

by **Jas Snell**

Are you a legal advocate for children who supports the idea of equipping families and communities with tools to self-resolve and maintain self-sufficiency through new practices that are personalized, culturally affirming, empowering, and most importantly, facilitate healing? If your answer is “yes”, then this article is for you.

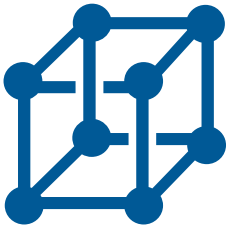
My name is Jas Snell, and I am a member of NACC's National Advisory Council for Children's Legal Representation. This article is based on my lived and professional experience with child and family serving and justice systems. My racial equity healing work is inspired by youth and families around me who are not thriving but instead surviving, despite a system that was not built to properly facilitate their elevation. This work is also inspired by my own individual experiences as an African American girl who entered systems as an adolescent. Most importantly, I am inspired by those before me who were most harmed by the racist structures that are deeply embedded and percolate through social sectors, including the child welfare and justice systems within our country. I will briefly walk you through a framework that views young people where they naturally are, in family and community, and as they are. This framework uplifts a system response that is racially equitable, restorative, addresses disparities, and facilitates healing. As I take you on this brief journey, I challenge you to reimagine how outcomes for children and families can be different when people who form systems understand the deep-rooted traumas of generations and respond to their needs with high-quality prevention and intervention efforts collaboratively. To believe in families is to set them up for the best possible situation.

Let's start with the young person's natural ecosystem which consists of family, community, and then the broader system. With family and community being the immediate connections



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Jas Snell (Tennessee) is a graduate of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga with a Bachelor of Science in Accounting and minor in Criminal Justice. Jas is currently working on her Certified Public Accountancy license while serving in roles as a Certified Peer Support Specialist, Young Adult Consultant, Jim Casey Initiative Young Fellow, member of NACC's National Advisory Council for Children's Legal Representation, and a community volunteer. Jas is passionate about improving the outcomes for those who touch child and family serving systems and uses her expertise gained through surviving them to influence holistic practices and policy reformation. Her ultimate goal is to start a primary school that offers two-generational services for youth aged 3–20 years old.

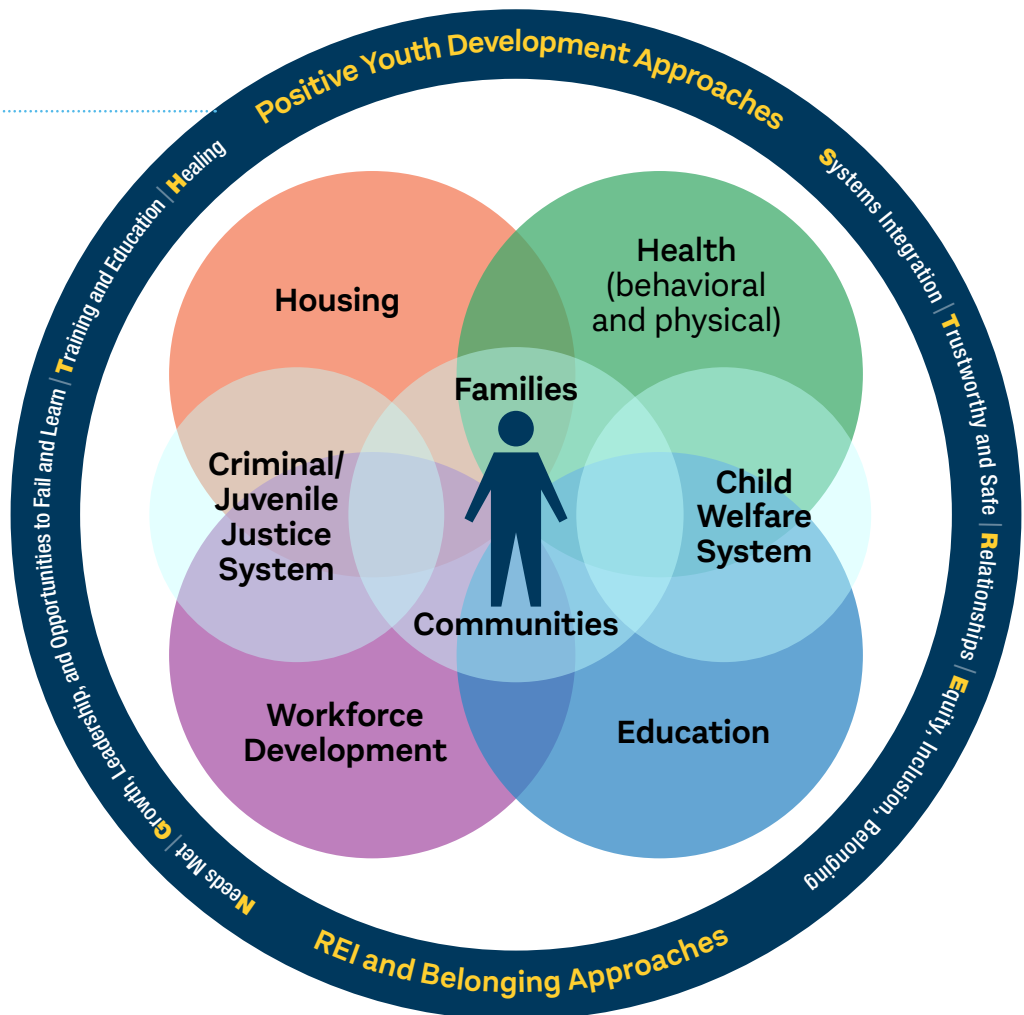


to young people, they must be the most supported in infrastructure and resources, next to the young person. Most system experiences and traumas of young people have either been experienced or felt by their families and communities. Therefore, solely addressing the needs of the young person alone is an isolated response that is not comprehensive enough to benefit everyone impacted by systems. Broader and more formal systems that are a little further removed from the young person are the criminal and juvenile justice systems, child welfare systems, housing, education, workforce, and mental and behavioral health. While all systems play pivotal roles in the positive development and healing of young people, natural and formal systems must share power in making change to achieve better outcomes and accept responsibility in how we got here.

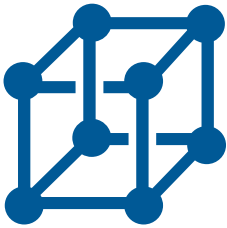
A Conceptual Model¹ was developed to illustrate the ecosystem referenced above.

STRENGTH

A conceptual model for integration of Positive Youth Development (PYD) and racial equity, inclusion (REI), and belonging approaches across systems to achieve better outcomes among young adults involved in the child welfare and/or juvenile or criminal justice systems.



¹ Lantos, Hannah, Allen, Tiffany, Abdi, Fadumo M., Franco, Felipe, Anderson Moore, Kristin, Snell, Jas, Bruce, Billie-Ann, Redd, Zakia, Robuck, Rebecca, & Miller, Jennifer. Child Trends. "Integrating Positive Youth Development and Race Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Approaches Across the Child Welfare and Justice Systems." (January 2022). Available at: <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/integrating-positive-youth-development-and-racial-equity-inclusion-and-belonging-approaches-across-the-child-welfare-and-justice-systems>



There are 8 core principles that support the positive development of young people who touch systems that form the acronym STRENGTH.

Systems Integration: Young people naturally exist within family and community. Therefore, all systems that serve and impact young people (both formal and informal) should *work together* to develop systems, strategies, and supports to best meet the needs of youth.

Trustworthy and Safe: Environments, settings, and staff must all present as emotionally, psychologically, and physically safe to support young adults in expression and healing.

Relationships: Although most of us were born into the world alone, we do not exist alone. The development and maintenance of positive relationships are essential in building feelings of support and providing guidance. These relationships include peer to peer, mentoring, family connections, and social connections.

Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging: Systems, and people who work in them, must commit to achieving equitable outcomes for all identities, which calls for justice beyond equality. All identities and experiences should be visible, respected, and weighed to foster a sense of belonging and grant young people permission to safely be themselves.

Needs Met Holistically: The self-identified needs of young adults must be prioritized and supported by formal and informal systems. These needs extend beyond basic or safety needs and should include emotional and spiritual needs.

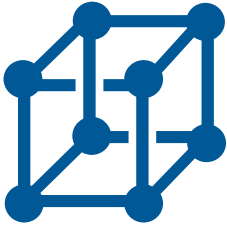
Growth, Leadership, and Opportunity to Fail and Learn: “Young adults desperately need opportunities to grow through trial and error without severe punishment or displacement. Learning to engage with reasonable risks and opportunities in healthy ways can create experiences that help young people learn to navigate challenges, communicate with others, ask for help, and try again.”²

Training and Education: Continuous access to educational opportunities helps to build financial capabilities, skills, and lifelong goals. All young people, particularly those who have been disadvantaged through systems of care, need opportunities to improve their quality of life through increased knowledge and skills.

Healing: Experiences of trauma are very common for system-involved youth and their families. When suppressed, traumatic experiences can negatively impact behaviors, damage relationships, and cause emotional dysfunction. To facilitate healing, systems must invest in identifying and addressing the root causes of breakdown within families and communities.

The STRENGTH model can be used to transform child and family advocacy. Identifying and addressing needs of children and families can and should be done through ecosystems before formal child welfare contact. Resources such as counseling, childcare assistance, transportation, furniture, workforce entry, housing assistance, well-being, in-home family services,

² Lantos et al., supra note 1.



and education should intentionally connect families and assist to close need gaps prior to engaging child welfare. The concept of punishment is deeply embedded in our civilization where we may not fully hear families and fight wholeheartedly for their needs but will punish them; those harsh punishments are still felt today. I challenge those who administer systems and surveil families to provide genuine care to those families instead of policing.

Healing is not achieved through replacement. Instead, healing requires equity and honesty. We often resort to removal and replacement practices, but let us remember that we are not “fixing” children or families. Replacing families is inappropriate and should be an absolute last resort in limited cases where all other options have been exhausted. Instead, let’s heal through identity and visibility – using lived experts as advisors and mentors to nurture a sense of belonging and allow space to self-identify. Let us heal through acknowledging the root causes that led families to be in need and addressing them to achieve reunification. Please inform families of their rights and volunteer your services as legal aid. As a legal advocate for children, you must remain open to the idea of equipping families and communities with tools to self-resolve and maintain self-sufficiency through new practices that are personalized, culturally affirming, empowering, and most importantly, practices that facilitate healing. Are you ready to model and activate the principles of positive development and healing within your sector? ■