



Child Welfare Information Gateway

PROTECTING CHILDREN ■ STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

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Enhancing Permanency for Older Youth in Out-of-Home Care

Finding permanent families for older children and youth in out-of-home care continues to need a strong focus from foster care workers and other child welfare professionals. National statistics show that older children stay in foster care longer and achieve permanency at lower rates than younger children. Those youth who “age out” of the foster care system often leave with few skills, minimal education, and inadequate preparation for living as productive, independent adults.

What's Inside:

- The importance of focusing on older youth
- Barriers to permanency for older youth
- Strategies for permanency planning with youth
- Promising programs
- Resources



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Responding to the challenge, many States and local jurisdictions have begun to focus on this population, implementing programs specifically designed to help older youth establish permanent connections. Many of these programs help youth build on relationships they have established throughout their lives with kin, foster parents, teachers, social workers, and others; other programs help youth establish new relationships that can lead to permanent family connections.

This bulletin addresses the specific challenges of permanency planning with older youth, highlighting successful models and activities.

The Importance of Focusing on Older Youth

Approximately half of the children in foster care are 11 years or older (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2005). Older youth in the foster care system remain in the system disproportionately longer than younger children, and their chances for achieving permanency decrease as they get older. Youth who age out of foster care have been in care an average of three times longer than children who leave foster care to join permanent families; at the time they exit foster care to independence, half have been in care for 45 months (3.75 years) or more. In order for States to decrease the numbers of children in foster care and move children and youth to permanent families more quickly, a concentrated effort must be made to address the large group of older children.

All States need to address the problem of permanency for older youth in order to comply

with outcomes on the Federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSTRs). The National Resource Center for Youth Development conducted an analysis of findings from the CFSTRs to identify trends concerning older youth in foster care (Winkle, Ansell, & Newman, 2004). While a majority of States had strengths on CFSTR items that specifically mentioned youth, barriers to permanency were noted, including gaps in services for adolescents, lack of placement resources for adolescents, and problems with the quality and consistency of independent living planning.

Barriers to Permanency for Older Youth

Older youth in foster care face a number of barriers to achieving permanency that are specific to their age group. Recognizing these challenges may help child welfare workers seek solutions that can facilitate permanent families and connections for these youth.

Policies and attitudes may not reflect an emphasis on permanency for youth. Workers in programs for older youth often note resistance among many child welfare and court professionals to spending time and money on establishing permanency for older youth, whom these professionals may consider “unadoptable.”

Case planning may be inadequate for permanency. The continued use of sequential case planning can slow the permanency process. When an agency waits until parental rights have been terminated before considering alternative permanency plans, the permanent family connection for a child or youth

is delayed. In addition, agencies may focus primarily on providing independent living services to youth, believing that these services meet expectations for working towards permanency. While independent living services are important in preparing youth for adulthood, they are not sufficient to connect youth with permanent families.

There are not enough families recruited to foster and adopt teens. Most agencies need to place a greater emphasis on identifying families who are willing to provide homes for teens. There is often a lack of focused recruitment for this group; in addition, adolescents and older youth who need families are often invisible to the community (Mallon, 2005).

Youth initially may be resistant to permanency planning. Many youth show initial resistance to permanency planning that involves the termination of their birth parents' rights, because they still feel emotional ties to their families. They may fear embarking on a relationship with a new family because of repeated past disappointments. Youth may not understand the long-term consequences of not having a family to turn to as a young adult. Finally, certain older youth may be difficult to place because of ongoing behavioral issues.

The court process may slow or frustrate efforts toward permanency. Even when agencies and workers are focused on permanency for youth, their efforts can be hindered by court processes that are slow or by judges who are reluctant to terminate parental rights. Judges also may not be aware of the viability of finding adoptive families for older youth. Another barrier in some cases may be the lack of a good working relationship between child welfare workers and courts.

Strategies for Permanency Planning With Youth

Supported by Federal legislation, States and localities have worked to develop programs and practices that offer better permanent outcomes for older youth in foster care and services for successful transition to adulthood. The following are some strategies that have emerged from the literature.

Strengthen Family Preservation/ Reunification Services

Maintaining the child safely in the home with the birth family remains the first priority. For youth still living at home but at risk of being removed due to their own behavior or a parent's behavior, family preservation services may help to support the children and the parents, so that these youth can remain in their homes. The array of services needed depends on each family's circumstances but may include:

- Family support services that build on family strengths
- Coordination with other community services
- Services or training specifically tailored for the parent or youth
- Mental health services for the youth

Most youth have a goal of reunification with their birth families, and support services to promote this goal should be provided to youth in out-of-home care and their families. Such services should be part of the case plan that addresses the unique circumstances

and needs of each youth and family, so that safe and successful reunification can be supported. Reunification can still be an option for youth who have been in care for years, as the elapsed time may have allowed the family to address the issues that brought the youth into care. However, in cases where steps toward reunification have not been successful, reunification should not be used as a default option for youth who are aging out of care without other permanency options.

A practice that has shown success with a number of families in promoting family preservation, permanency, and connectedness for youth is **family group decision-making (FGDM)**. In FGDM, extended family members and other important people in the life of the youth come together to establish and implement a plan for the safety, well-being, and permanency of the child or youth. Typically, a family conference is arranged and facilitated by a child welfare worker or agency. The family meets to develop or revise a permanency plan, including the roles of family members in implementing the plan. The proposed plan must ultimately be approved by the agency (and court, if there is court involvement); however, the family's participation helps to garner their commitment to the youth and to the plan's success. A recent synopsis of research on FGDM found the following (Merkel-Holguin, Nixon, & Burford, 2003):

- A number of studies reported reduction in re-abuse rates for families who participated in FGDM, compared to those who did not.
- Families involved in FGDM showed an increase in relative care.
- Children and youth involved with FGDM experienced either a minimal or a

decreased number of moves, compared with traditional samples.

- Some studies showed that FGDM resulted in greater chances for family reunification.
- FGDM increased family supports and helped family functioning.
- FGDM increased the involvement of fathers and paternal relatives.

One resource for FGDM is the website of the National Center on Family Group Decision Making, a program of American Humane, found at www.americanhumane.org/fgdm. Other resources for FGDM are available on the website of the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning at http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/family-group-conferencing.html.

Consider Open Adoptions

While adoption is the most legally permanent family arrangement, some youth may resist it because they believe it requires severing relationships with their birth parents or siblings. Open adoptions allow for both a permanent legal family for the youth and continued connections with birth parents, siblings, or other relatives.

Make Kinship Care a Priority

While informal kinship care has always been an option for some families, more formal arrangements, made by the child welfare system, have become more prevalent since the late 1980s. Most States now have policies that require agencies to seek out placement with relatives when possible (Geen, 2003a). In terms of permanency, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 provided guidance to States

in recognizing the importance of permanent placements with relatives as a permanency option (Geen, 2003b). In cases where the caregiving arrangement requires the child to stay with the family into adulthood, the family may pursue guardianship or adoption.

Relatives of youth and other adults important to them can take some effort to locate but may be happy to be found. The literature is replete with anecdotes of relatives and others who had lost contact with youth or who had tried to maintain contact but were rebuffed by child welfare agencies in the past. When located and asked to provide a permanent connection or to be involved in helping the youth transition, many were delighted to do so. Paternal relatives may not have received adequate emphasis initially from the child welfare system, but may provide the needed family connection.

States vary in the services and support they offer to kinship caregivers. When the caregivers are licensed foster parents, they may receive the standard foster parent stipend for their jurisdiction. Some States have alternative arrangements for kinship caretakers that provide various levels of support.

Offer Guardianship and Subsidized Guardianship as Options

For youth who are reluctant to have legal ties permanently severed with their birth parents, even when the birth parents are unable to care for them, the option of guardianship may provide the necessary legal and permanent family. Guardians may be relatives or nonrelatives, when provided for in State law, who assume parental responsibility and authority for the youth, as established by a court. A limited number of States have applied for

and received time-limited Federal waivers that provide them with more flexibility in using Federal funding, and they offer subsidized guardianship programs. Other States fund guardianship programs with their own State money. This type of program may enable caregivers who have been receiving a foster care subsidy to become legal guardians without losing necessary financial support.

Expand Permanency Options

Ideally, permanency for youth should include a permanent *legal* connection to a family, such as reuniting with birth parents, adoption, kinship care, or legal guardianship. However, when these options are less likely, workers may want to help youth pursue other permanent connections concurrently with caring adults. Such adults may provide lifelong support that will help the youth in transitioning to adulthood. Youth may build on connections with maternal and paternal kin, teachers, former foster parents, employers, and others for support, and eventually may be able to pursue a legal connection. In such instances, formalizing the permanent connection can help clarify what the youth can expect from the caring adult.

A study with California youth in care gave youth the chance to talk about their views on permanency (Sanchez, 2004). Not only did youth desire permanent connections, but they also made distinctions among the different types of permanency. When choosing among relational, physical, and legal permanence, most youth felt that relational permanence was most important.

Two resources that may be helpful are:

- The Permanency Pact developed by FosterClub (www.fosterclub.com) that iden-

tifies 45 specific supports a permanency partner might offer a youth in transition from foster care

- The National Foster Care Month website (www.fostercaremonth.org/Home) that offers resources for families about how to become involved in youths' lives in ways that can lead to permanency

Implement Concurrent Planning

Sequential case planning may involve delays in permanency outcomes for youth in out-of-home care. For most children and youth, the primary goal is family reunification. With concurrent planning, a secondary goal is pursued simultaneously. If the secondary goal is placement with relatives, child welfare workers can begin to identify and contact relatives even while continuing to work toward family reunification.

For information on concurrent planning, see:

- Child Welfare Information Gateway's *Concurrent Planning: What the Evidence Shows* at http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue_briefs/concurrent_evidence/index.cfm
- The National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning website at www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/concurrent-permanency-planning.html

Recruit Foster and Adoptive Families for Older Children

Recruitment efforts for foster and adoptive families for older youth may focus on (1) getting the message to the public about older children available for fostering or adoption, (2) the benefits of adopting older youth,

and (3) finding permanent connections for specific children. Recruiting foster parents for older youth carries great potential for finding permanent adoptive or guardianship families for these youth: In FY 2003, foster parents became adoptive parents for more than 60 percent of the children who were adopted from foster care that year (U.S. DHHS, 2005).

The use of the media to present children waiting for adoption has grown tremendously. Photolisting on the Internet has become a prevalent practice that provides information to anyone with Internet access. Prospective families reading the listings find enough information on a particular youth to pique their interest so that they follow up with the youth's agency. The AdoptUsKids photolisting service (www.adoptuskids.org), in English and Spanish, is a national photolisting campaign funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. In addition, agencies have found some success with television campaigns such as Wednesday's Child, print campaigns, and videos and videoconferencing.

Marketing to families most likely to adopt children from foster care also has become popular. Several organizations have begun to make use of both marketing (media presentations, bulletin boards, etc.) and market research, which is used to identify families or communities most likely to adopt (Capriccioso, 2004). Those families can then be targeted through direct advertising methods.

Creating opportunities for families and adults to come into contact with adolescents who need homes is the key to broadening the pool of potential adopters. Activities sponsored by the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program like job fairs, teen conferences, employment mentoring, and life skill groups

provide excellent opportunities for youth to meet caring adults who might become permanent connections. Adults who may never have considered adopting may become more open to the idea once they meet a particular child in need. Supportive relationships, such as mentoring, may also become long-term placements when adults find they have grown more connected to the youth.

Other ways of creating opportunities to bring youth and prospective families together include adoption parties in which waiting youth and families meet during scheduled fun activities. In some cases, agencies or States have organized events in which workers for waiting youth meet workers for prospective families with completed home studies.

Involve Youth in Their Plans

The literature shows that involving youth in planning for their own permanency outcomes can greatly facilitate the process. The use of a team approach in which the adolescent is an active team member can help identify possible permanency resources. Youth can supply information about family members, distant and near, as well as other people (e.g., teachers, former foster families, neighbors) with whom they feel a connection. In addition, talking to youth and actively involving them in the permanency planning process can help to prepare them for the transition to a new family or situation. Youth who are involved in the planning process may take more responsibility for the success of the arrangement. One resource for involving youth in permanency planning is FYI Binder from Foster Club (<http://www.fosterclub.com/fyi3/binder/flash/binder.cfm>).

Focus on Pre- and Postplacement Services

The provision of appropriate and timely services may make the difference in whether permanency outcomes are successful for youth. Preplacement services should focus on:

- Helping youth understand the long-term benefits of having a permanent family
- Helping both the youth and the family decide whether the placement is desirable
- Providing the family with full background information about the youth
- Helping the youth and family determine how connections to birth family members will be maintained (in most cases)
- Planning for the youth's educational, health, and other needs
- Preparing both the family and the youth for typical transition issues

The availability of postplacement services may make adoption possible for many families and youth that require financial assistance and services after adoption. (See the Child Welfare Information Gateway publication *Postadoption Services: A Bulletin for Professionals* at http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_postadoptbulletin/index.cfm.) Adoptive families may need services in any number of areas, including:

- Financial assistance or subsidies (most children adopted from foster care are eligible for subsidies)
- Community services (including medical or mental health services, educational services, and respite care)
- Support groups (including those for parents and those for youth)

Provide Staff Enhancements

Staff who are overburdened with caseloads are not able to provide optimum services to youth and families. A summary of CFSR findings identified frequency and quality of caseworker visits to youth and birth families as being significantly associated with better permanency outcomes (U.S. DHHS, 2004). In addition, stability of caseworker assignment can impact casework. Frequent changes in the worker assigned to a case may result in disruptions in permanency planning for youth (Landsman, Tyler, Black, Malone, & Groza, 1999).

Training for staff should include training in working with teens and in recruiting and working with families for teens. Robert Lewis and Maureen Heffernan (2000) note a number of training topics for supervisors to cover in training staff to find permanent homes for adolescents:

- Making the case for permanency to staff
- Permanency tools to use with teens
- Supporting permanency

The National Child Welfare Resource Center for Adoption (<http://www.nrcadoption.org/index.htm>) also offers training curricula for staff who work with teens through their Family Bound curriculum, which emphasizes cultural competency, knowledge of issues facing youth, easy rapport with youth, and a firm belief in the family permanence potential of all teens.

Promote Court Reform

The literature points to the court process as one of the impediments to achieving timely permanency outcomes for children and youth. The recommendations of the Pew Commission

on Children in Foster Care (2004) included a number of recommendations for improving the court system, such as the use of court performance measures, collaboration between courts and child welfare personnel, effective representation of children and families, and leadership from Chief Justices and other State court leaders to reform the system. More recently, a number of leading national judicial organizations partnered to produce a curriculum for caseload management for cases involving children in foster care (Salyers, Somerlot, & Conner, 2005). The curriculum is designed to promote collaboration among court personnel, attorneys, and child welfare personnel so that they can develop strategies to address delays in the court process. A companion paper (Fiermonte & Salyers, 2005) explores the ways that courts across the country are collaborating with child welfare agencies to expedite the court process and improve permanency outcomes for children.

Promising Programs

A number of jurisdictions have begun to develop new programs that target older youth for adoption and other permanency outcomes. Federal waivers have made it easier for some States to use flexible funding to test pilot projects designed to help youth achieve permanency. In addition, Federal funding in the form of grants, such as the Children's Bureau Discretionary Grant program, has provided funds for other innovative programs.

In Fiscal Year 2005, the Children's Bureau awarded 5-year cooperative agreements to nine organizations to develop, implement, evaluate, and disseminate information about programs that provide adoption services and

supports to youth who wish to retain contact with family members to improve permanency outcomes. This grant cluster is working closely with three Children's Bureau National Resource Centers to promote information-sharing within the cluster and with the field. The grantees are focusing efforts in areas such as strategies to introduce the concept of open adoption to youth; strategies to connect youth with caring, responsible adults; and effective models of youth leadership and youth involvement in planning.

Other, nonfederally funded, projects have grown out of State and local efforts. Three projects are described here.

New York City's You Gotta Believe: Finding Permanent Homes to Prevent Homelessness

You Gotta Believe (YGB) is a New York-based program that places teens and preteens from foster care into permanent homes. Prospective families are trained and prepared to provide permanent, not temporary, homes, and receive certification for adoption.

How it works. YGB receives youth referrals from city, county, and other municipal foster care agencies (Louisell, 2004). Motivated agency workers give YGB access to the youth being referred so that YGB staff can begin to follow up on leads for permanent families. These youth can also participate in YGB activities, such as the YGB cable television show and other activities that present youth to prospective families.

YGB recruits families by sending out staff members, current and former foster youth, and experienced adoptive families to talk to groups at places such as churches, commu-

nity board meetings, and street fairs. Training classes for prospective families are offered year-round in four locations. Families can join the 10-week training sessions at any point. These sessions are taught by YGB staff, adoptive parents, and youth and provide another opportunity for teens seeking permanent homes to meet prospective families.

Once a teenager is placed with a family, YGB provides postadoption services in the form of ongoing group services, crisis intervention, and social activities (Louisell, 2004). A shadow postplacement worker is assigned by YGB to make at least weekly contact with the family. These workers are experienced adoptive parents who understand the problems that families encounter and are able to provide support.

Funding. A variety of funding streams support this program. The City of New York provides the bulk of funding, but YGB staff supplement with money from speaking engagements. In addition, the Dave Thomas Foundation pays for the salaries of several part-time recruiters. YGB also received a Federal Adoption Opportunities grant in 2001.

Outcomes. Between its founding in 1995 and 2001, YGB found permanent families for 18 youths. After the receipt of funding from New York City and the Federal Government, beginning in 2001, more than 100 youths were placed with families.

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Massachusetts Families for Kids: Making Lifelong Family Connections for Adolescents

The Department of Social Services and Children's Services of Roxbury's Massachusetts Families for Kids (MFFK) program are working together to prevent teenagers in foster care from aging out of the system without a permanent family connection in their life. Lifelong Family Connections for Adolescents (LFCA), a statewide initiative, is designed to improve outcomes for older foster youth by helping them to identify and maintain a permanent connection with an adult.

How it works. LFCA uses seven components to help adolescents in foster care develop lifelong family connections:

- A community of care review to develop the youth's understanding of the need for permanence and to search for adults willing to commit to the youth
- Specialized recruitment for adolescents who do not have a permanent connection within their own community of care
- A family consultation team that includes the youth and significant adults and social service providers who produce a written plan for permanency
- "Family bound" training to help prepare adolescents to make permanent connections and transition from institutional to family settings
- Parents As Tender Healers (PATH) training for adults
- The MFFK Speak Out team to offer support and mentoring

- Specialized postplacement services (LeBeau & Stevens, 2004)

Youth, age 14 to 18 years, are referred by social workers and join the program voluntarily. They are given responsibility for the process and are asked to identify people with whom they want a connection (Louisell, 2004). The MFFK staff encourage youth to try to make more than one connection, and the staff follow up on the leads that the youth identify. Postplacement services are funded separately, but MFFK staff maintain contact for 3 to 6 months after placement.

Funding. Initial funding for the pilot project in 2001 was provided by the Department of Social Services. Their success led to a State contract. In 2003, they received a Federal Adoption Opportunities grant, which runs through 2008. They also raise money through fundraising, training, and consultation (Louisell, 2004).

Outcomes. When the pilot project began in 2001, 33 youths were referred, 24 received services, and all 24 made permanent connections (Louisell, 2004). Between 2003 and 2004, 27 youth were referred, and 20 received services. With the receipt of the Federal Adoption Opportunities Grant, MFFK staff plan to have 125 youth referred, with 100 receiving services (Louisell).

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Colorado's Project UPLIFT: Caring Connections for Adolescents

Project UPLIFT (Understanding Permanency Lessons in Future Teamwork) Adolescent Connection was a 9-month pilot study in 2002-2003 in five Colorado counties, with the aim of connecting adolescent youth with previously involved adults. Youth participants included a number who had significant barriers to permanency, including involvement with the juvenile justice system or behavioral/mental health issues.

How it worked. Fifty-six youth (average age 14 years) living in out-of-home care worked with four Adolescent Connection workers to identify possible permanent connections. All possible connections were explored, and workers used a variety of methods to locate connections, including Internet search engines (Custer Enterprises, 2003). Four types of existing relationships were identified for each youth (birth parents, other kin, foster parents, and others), and 16 different levels of contact were established, ranging from "no contact" to "reunification with birth parents." This allowed workers to "score" relationships and develop some estimation of both the number and the importance of the connections that were established for each youth.

Funding. The project was funded by a Federal Adoption Opportunities Grant.

Outcomes. Of the 56 youth, 47 made at least one connection. A total of 122 connections were documented for these youth, 75 percent

of which were interjurisdictional. Twelve connections were adoptions or intentions to adopt, and two youth were being reunited with birth families. In addition, an evaluation of the financial savings provided by this program showed that the expected savings from the cost of residential and foster care for the 14 youth who had made permanent placement connections would amount to \$1,776,000 ("Connecting adolescents," 2004).

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Summary

Ensuring that older youth do not leave foster care without a permanent family has become a focus for many child welfare workers and agencies. As States and agencies work toward this goal, supported by Federal legislation and funding, more evidence-based practice will become available to inform the field. Model programs and pilot projects such as You Gotta Believe, Lifelong Family Connections for Adolescents, and Project UPLIFT provide both practical information for policymakers and child welfare workers, as well as inspiration that older youth in out-of-home placements can find permanent families who will provide them with a lifetime of love and support.

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Resources

The following is a sample of web-based resources for permanency planning for older youth. Please refer to the Reference list (above) for additional resources.

California Permanency for Youth Project (www.cpy.org)

California Youth Connection (www.calyouthconn.org) promotes the participation of foster youth in policy development and legislative change to improve the foster care system and strives to improve social work practice and child welfare policy.

Casey Family Programs (www.casey.org), especially for tools to pass on to youth such as Casey Life Skills tools (www.casey.org/Resources/Tools/CaseyLifeSkills.htm).

Casey Family Services (www.caseyfamilyservices.org), especially materials from their 2006 National Convening on Youth Permanence and the white papers and publications written by the Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice.

Foster Care Month website (<http://www.fostercaremonth.org/Home>) offers ideas about how to get involved and show appreciation for the foster families and staff who support the children and youth in foster care.

FosterClub (<http://fosterclub.org/index.cfm>), a resource for youth in care

National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement (<http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids/about.htm>), especially the webpage on adolescents (http://tatis.muskie.usm.maine.edu/pubs/pub2Wtemp.asp?SUBJECT_AREA=Adolescents)

National Child Welfare Resource Center for Youth Development (www.nrcys.ou.edu/nrcyd.htm)

National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning (www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/), especially the Youth Permanency Tools (www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/youth-permanency.html)

Orphan Foundation of America (www.orphan.org)

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