BULLETIN FOR PROFESSIONALS
September 2019

Belonging Matters—Helping Youth Explore Permanency

If you are a child welfare or adoption professional working with youth in foster care, you have an important role in ensuring that young people explore adoption or other permanency options and understand the necessity of developing permanent connections for support and resilience as they near adulthood. Professionals need to help young people in transition fully explore and process what the different options may mean for them so they can make an informed decision—one that represents their best interests and sets them up for success.

Discussions with youth about permanency should take place over time, with close youth engagement and input. Child Welfare Information Gateway conducted a series of interviews with young people—those adopted from foster care and those who aged out of the system—to help illuminate the beliefs and concerns that motivate a desire for either achieving legal permanency or emancipating without it and the emotions behind them.

The following are tips based on the shared experiences of youth formerly in foster care, along with links to resources that may help you in your work. Names have been changed to protect identities.

WHAT'S INSIDE

Help youth understand what family, belonging, and permanency mean.

Help youth explore their permanency options—what they want and why.

Don't allow independent living to be glamorized.

Recognize that family loyalties may affect youths' desire to pursue permanency.

Encourage birth family connections.

Everyone's story is unique. Know the youth you work with. Listen. Advocate.

Be honest and direct with the youth you serve.

References

Child Welfare Information Gateway

Children's Bureau/ACYF/ACF/HHS
800.394.3366 | Email: info@childwelfare.gov | https://www.childwelfare.gov

Children's Bureau

Help Youth Understand What Family, Belonging, and Permanency Mean.

Young people who have grown up without the security of consistent family connections and positive peer supports may not fully recognize the necessity of such relationships. You can help ensure they are aware of the benefits and opportunities that come from connectedness and help them recognize and tap into their existing supports—relatives, a former neighbor or foster parent, a coach, a friend from their faith community—to build the family-like network essential for success.

A sense of belonging provides the security and self-assuredness needed to achieve potential in life. Help the youth you work with understand the basic need to belong and the importance of having a support system to share life's inevitable ups and downs. The videos "Young Adult, Formerly in Foster Care: This Is My Family, Where I Call Home" (https://youtu.be/jAVIBd1PK7I) and "The Human Need for Belonging," a video more suitable for the professional or parent audience (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-r-ci4iybt8), may help both young people and those who work with them appreciate the innate need to experience belonging, connection, and permanency.

For more information about helping youth encourage connectedness with supportive adults, see Child Welfare Information Gateway's webpage, Creating and Maintaining Meaningful Connections (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/permanency/planning/connections/).

For more information about preparing youth for permanency, see the North American Council on Adoptable Children's *Youth Are Never Too Old to Be Adopted* (https://www.nacac.org/resource/adoption-teen-permanency/).

The young people we interviewed commented on the sense of hope that accompanies permanency and the despair that can come from a lack of connection.

> "[Understand that] you cannot grow up in this world alone. That you actually do better with people around you, supporting you...people in your life that are going to help you get there, achieve your goals...Try to get youth to really think long-term and help them understand the importance of securing permanent figures in their life who can support them wherever they are. When my social worker explained what adoption was, I was like, 'Oh my gosh. I want that!' As much as I loved my birth mom, I knew I needed to be looked after. I knew I needed a better chance at life."
>
> —Jo, adopted at age 11

> "I am so happy now. I feel like I got what I never knew I always wanted! Every day I wake up feeling grateful that I have a wonderful and loving [adoptive] family and I know in my heart that no matter what I'm struggling with, they're all there to help me through it."
>
> —Molly, adopted at age 17

> "Permanency was never discussed with me. I didn't know what the word was. Going through the system with no family, that's almost more traumatic than being abused... The only permanent thing in my life was yearly court and my social worker."
>
> —Sam, aged out

Help Youth Explore Their Permanency Options—What They Want and Why.

Child welfare professionals and other adults working with young people in foster care need to help them explore the many options for legal and emotional/relational permanency, as well as the feelings of fear, rejection, grief, loss, or abandonment that can create a reluctance to pursue permanency. Professionals working with young people should have ongoing conversations about adoption and other permanency plans. In fact, professionals are required by law to begin working with youth on their transition plans by the time youth are 14 years old, although requirements vary by State. Engage with local youth boards to provide young people with opportunities to discuss permanency options with peers and identify the associated benefits (see Information Gateway's webpage, State Youth Advocacy/Advisory Boards & Foster Care Alumni Associations, at https://www.childwelfare.gov/organizations/?CWIGFunctionsaction=rols:main.dspList&rolType=Custom&RS_ID=160).

Support youth as they investigate their options and ensure they establish connections with adults in their lives who can help them. While you may be motivated to pursue legal permanency, remember that relational permanency is just as important for the young people you work with. What's important is that youth develop and secure strong bonds with supportive adults that will last a lifetime.

Conversely, professionals need to facilitate conversations with the adults who are considering making a permanency commitment to youth. As a child welfare or adoption professional, it is your job to help them clarify and confirm their commitment, make sure it is unconditional, and ensure they understand—where appropriate—the importance of maintaining a young person's birth family connections to parents, siblings, and extended kin. Keep in mind that the youth you serve and the adults supporting them need to have a mutual understanding of the expectations going forward.

For more information, see *Promoting Permanency for Older Youth in Out-of-Home Care* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/focus/bulletins-permanency/), *Working With Youth to Develop a Transition Plan* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/transitional-plan/), and the North American Council on Adoptable Children's *Adoptalk* article, "Unpacking the No: Helping Young People Explore the Idea of Adoption" (https://www.nacac.org/resource/unpacking-the-no-helping-young-people-explore-the-idea-of-adoption/).

Some of the young people we interviewed noted that they were unaware of their permanency options or desires. Some expressed a fear of commitment or the belief that their age and/or situation made them "unadoptable." These fears and beliefs were not addressed.

"I was never given the option of adoption. It was just never a conversation that was brought up, other than with my [foster care] respite family. I wanted some form of permanency, but my behaviors caused me to move all the time."

—Sam, aged out

"I didn't know that I wished to be adopted. I knew I wanted to be loved and I wanted a place to live, but I was too scared to open my heart one more time. That's why I changed my permanency plan from adoption to extended foster care. Adoption seemed unreal to me. I was too old and too unlovable."

—Molly, adopted at age 17

"Because my grandmother got me back at 17, my foster care agency no longer followed up with me to inform me about next steps pertaining to permanency. I knew nothing about housing, educational grants, or any benefits that I received because I was in the foster care system. I didn't even know that I could age out of the foster care system...I wasn't looking for a family or someone to adopt me. I just wanted to go home. Nevertheless, I craved to belong somewhere because I didn't belong at home either...I noticed people who weren't blood [relatives] cared about me more than my own, so that is what changed my idea of family."

—Elena, aged out

Don't Allow Independent Living to Be Glamorized.

Independent living may seem like an attractive alternative to adoption or other permanency after years in the system. Youth may imagine a life where they are in control and don't have to answer to others. While you can respect the desire to age out of foster care independently, make sure youth understand the realities and challenges of independent living. Make sure they are aware that young people who emancipate without legal or relational permanency are at greater risk for homelessness (Bender, Yang, Ferguson, & Thompson, 2015), low educational attainment (Braciszewski & Stout, 2012), early parenthood, and high rates of unemployment (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Rapp, 2010). While it is normal for teens to want to assume greater control over their day-to-day living, that doesn't mean they don't need supports and strong connections in the process. Otherwise, what may initially seem like freedom from foster care can suddenly become devastatingly lonely and overwhelming.

Some of the young people we interviewed shared their feelings about aging out of foster care and the realities of independent living.

"Now that I'm 21 and I've aged out, I know that aging out is probably the hardest [part of foster care] because you are truly alone with no help from anybody. No one checks up on you...and everybody expects you to do the right thing and be a productive member in society despite not having the right tools to do so....When I was younger I was excited about getting my own apartment [and exiting foster care]. However, now that I am older, I know that I am not well-equipped to have my own place just yet."

—Elena, aged out

"My main goal was to get out on my own. I wanted to be alone. I was already mentally independent."

—Patrice, aged out

"Aging out of the system meant that I had to learn how to grow up...It meant that I had to stop relying on others. I would love to say that that has changed—but, honestly, it hasn't. I still rely on others while trying desperately to pick myself back up."

—Sam, aged out

For additional resources to help young people prepare for adulthood, see Information Gateway's *Working With Youth to Develop a Transition Plan* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/transitional-plan/) and The Annie E. Casey Foundation's *The Road to Adulthood* (http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-theroadtoadulthood-2017.pdf).

Recognize That Family Loyalties May Affect Youths' Desire to Pursue Permanency.

In many cases, a reluctance to explore permanency options has to do with a youth's fear of betraying family members. It's important to help young people understand that legal or emotional permanency doesn't mean replacing family members or cutting ties. Rather, permanency is adding to the "family" of caring individuals who will support them throughout life and help them achieve their goals.

You can support youth in navigating their questions, feelings, and conversations surrounding permanency and family loyalties. Convening family group decision meetings and family team meetings may help families work through difficult issues. More information is available on Information Gateway's webpage on family group decision-making (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/famcentered/decisions/).

Additional resources include the National Center for Child Welfare Excellence's *Core Components of Youth Permanency: Facilitation of Youth-Driven, Family-Centered Team Decision-Making* (http://www.nccwe.org/toolkits/youth-permanency/component-3.html) and *Winnebago Family Group Decision-Making: Intervention Implemented by the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska for the QIC-AG Project* (https://qic-ag.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/QICAG-P02-Winnebago-v05-Final.pdf).

For helping families who have adopted youth from foster care, see Information Gateway's *Helping Your Child Transition From Foster Care to Adoption* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-transition/).

"For me to be adopted would have been weird. I still had an outside relationship with my [birth] mother. It's funny, because when I went to the North American Council on Adoptable Children I had met this older lady and I thought, 'Oh yeah, I would have loved to be adopted by you,' because she was just so sweet. And if this lady had said 'I want to take you and keep you forever,' I probably would have! But there's a mix of things you have to prepare for and want to talk to your family about. I didn't know whether my mother would feel betrayed."

—Patrice, aged out

"Knowing what I know now, I would have let my grandmother adopt me, because that's what I wanted. However, I didn't want to create a riff in our family."

—Elena, aged out

"My greatest concern with being adopted was the feeling of betrayal to myself and to my family. I refused to change my last name. I did not want my biological mama to know that I was adopted. I felt shame because of it."

—Teresa, adopted at age 17

"I asked [the family providing weekend respite care] one day if they would adopt me. They really thought about it and had a talk with me about what that meant. See, they only did closed adoptions. Meaning I wouldn't be able to talk to my mom anymore, or at least until I was 18...I wasn't okay with that."

—Sam, aged out

Encourage Birth Family Connections.

Maintaining connections with birth family members is important for many young people seeking permanency and can help ensure the success of permanency efforts. This may help minimize feelings of grief and loss, the trauma associated with separation, and help young people develop a stronger sense of identity. You can help adoptive families understand the importance of these relationships and help them explore any resistance or fears they may have in helping youth maintain such connections. When needed, help youth seek counseling from qualified therapists to help process what has happened to them and learn how to improve their relationships, if desired.

Because sibling relationships are critical to well-being, it can be traumatic when out-of-home care results in sibling separation. A young person's fear of a broken relationship with siblings may influence their feelings about permanency. Helping youth explore their questions and thoughts about what adoption and permanency may mean for their sibling connections can help them be more open to pursuing permanency.

For more information on encouraging birth family connections, see the following Information Gateway resources:

- Maintaining Connections With Birth Families in Adoption (web section) (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/preplacement/adoption-openness/)
- Considering Siblings in Permanency Planning (web section) (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/permanency/planning/siblings/)
- *Sibling Issues in Foster Care and Adoption* (publication) (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/siblingissues/)

Everyone's Story Is Unique. Know the Youth You Work With. Listen. Advocate.

One of the most consistent messages from young people who emerge from the system is the importance of being heard and advocated for by adults in their lives. This includes helping youth identify what family means to them and considering permanency options that are in a young person's best interests.

We talked with two young adults whose case outcomes didn't reflect their personal goals. Teresa was adopted from foster care despite her wishes otherwise. She wanted to avoid adoption because of her loyalty to her biological mother but believes she was pressured into adoption for fear she would lose contact with her biological sister.

> "[Most of] the adults in my life were all pretty much insistent that adoption would be the best thing for me. My biological mother did not want me to be adopted. [Because of loyalty to my mother] I did not want to be adopted. I was very adamant about that fact. [But] I was concerned that if I did not get adopted, that I would lose contact with my sister and be left alone. My relationship with my sister was the only 'positive' aspect I saw to being adopted, but it was also used against me...My wishes regarding my permanency were not honored. I was faced with coercion and manipulation from my parent, sibling, therapist, and caseworker. At one point, my adoptive (foster at the time) mother told me, 'You make me feel like I am not good enough to be your mother. Either you get adopted or you get out of my house....'
>
> At this point in time, I am neutral about my adoption. I love both of my families, but I am alone and between my families.
>
> Respect for the youth is the most important thing—realizing that these choices being made affect lives. It is important to look at the benefits from either side of adoption/permanency before making a decision...Be aware of the different parts and people at play, and pay attention to the changes that may come when dealing with permanency options. Often, things that should be seen as a red flag may be overlooked to close the case.
>
> Someone actually listening to me and taking my feelings into account would have made a huge difference."
>
> —Teresa, adopted

Elena experienced years in foster care—and ultimately aged out—because of repeated efforts to reunify her with her biological mother. She now wishes she had been adopted by her maternal grandmother early on and spared the years of trauma she endured as her mother struggled with substance use. She believes that if her case managers had included her mother, her grandmother, and herself in the decision-making process, the outcome could have been very different. Both young people believe that their respective cases could have addressed permanency in a way that aligned more closely with their personal needs and goals while encouraging long-term connections with supportive adults.

> "[The agency] wanted me to go back to my mother, because she wanted me. Reunification was the [agency's] goal. That's not what I wanted...My grandmother always made me feel safe despite everything that was going on around us. Knowing what I know now, I would have allowed my grandmother to adopt me instead of be my legal guardian.
>
> Know your youth enough to know what they need. I wish I had had someone advocate for me so that I could take advantage of the benefits that could help me sustain life. I only found out about them 3 months before my 21st birthday, and because of that I missed out on great opportunities."
>
> —Elena, aged out

Be Honest and Direct With the Youth You Serve.

Don't underestimate the importance of direct and authentic communication to build trust with youth and help them understand the reasons behind various permanency recommendations.

> "Adults should not sugar-coat things for kids in care. We need to know the truth."
>
> —Molly, adopted at age 17
>
> "Be as transparent and authentic with your youth as the job allows. This way a connection can be built."
>
> —Elena, aged out
>
> "Everything should happen at the youth's pace. Never rush, never assume, never force."
>
> —Sam, aged out

For more ideas, see Child Welfare Information Gateway and AdoptUSKids' tip sheet, *Talking With Older Youth About Adoption* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/talking.pdf).

References

Bender, K., Yang, J., Ferguson, K., & Thompson, S. (2015). Experiences and needs of homeless youth with a history of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 55*, 222–231. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.06.007.

Braciszewski, J. M., & Stout, R. L. (2012). Substance use among current and former foster youth: A systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review, 34*(12), 2337–2344. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.08.011

Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, A., Lee, J., & Raap, M. (2010). *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at age 23 and 24.* Chicago: Chapin Hall at The University of Chicago.

Acknowledgement:

This product was developed with the assistance of AdoptUSKids staff and young people from the AdoptUSKids' Speaker's Bureau as well as staff and youth advocates from the North American Council on Adoptable Children.

Suggested citation:

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2019). *Belonging matters—Helping youth explore permanency*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.