



Administration for Children
and Families

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT TEAM

Recommendations for Improving Permanency and Well-Being

PERMANENCY
WITH KIN

-1-

RELATIONAL
PERMANENCY

-2-

OLDER YOUTH
ADOPTION

-3-

A Resource for Agencies and Courts

ACF Youth Engagement Team

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and the Children's Bureau value the expertise of young adults who have experienced the foster care system. The ACF Youth Engagement Team was developed in 2020 in order to integrate youth voice into ACF's ALL-IN Foster Adoption Challenge, a national effort to achieve permanency for waiting children and youth.

Three roundtable discussions were held with the Youth Engagement Team and ACF Assistant Secretary Lynn Johnson, Commissioner Elizabeth Darling, and Associate Commissioner Jerry Milner. The topics discussed were 1) supporting permanency with kin, 2) supporting relational permanency and 3) supporting successful older youth adoption. A summary of key recommendations from each discussion is included in this report.

The recorded discussions can be viewed at <https://www.fosterclub.com/all-in-team>





SUPPORTING PERMANENCY WITH KIN

Defining "Kin"

For purposes of the roundtable discussion and this document, the term “kin” encompasses both relatives (those related by blood or marriage) and fictive kin (those who are unrelated but have such a close emotional relationship that they are considered like family to children and youth).



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Of all children and youth in foster care, 32% were placed with relatives

Of all children and youth waiting for adoption, 25% were placed with relatives

Of youth ages 14+ waiting for adoption, 14% were placed with relatives

Source: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Administration for Children and Families
Children's Bureau
Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS)
Data as of June 23, 2020



System Improvements

- Home studies and background checks for kinship caregivers should be individualized, based on family strengths and unique needs.
- Courts play a critical role in ensuring that ongoing searches for kin are occurring, that every effort is made to achieve permanency with kin, and that they are provided with the supportive services they need.

Meaningfully Engage Youth


- Youth should be asked “What relationships are most important to you?” rather than “Do you have any relatives or friends you could live with?” This puts the emphasis on identifying connections rather than just placement options.
- Youth may be reluctant to suggest kin as placement resources as they don’t want kin to feel obligated, but that doesn’t mean they don’t want to stay connected to them and it doesn’t mean kin may not be open to placement if the agency approached them and offered supports.
- Youth need to understand their options so that they can make informed decisions in case planning. Young people should know that they have the right to maintain important relationships with family.

Concerted efforts were made by states to identify, locate, inform, and evaluate maternal relatives in 56% of cases, and paternal relatives in 47% of cases.

Of all cases reviewed, when the child/youth was placed with relatives, 93% of those placements were stable and were meeting the needs of the child.

Source: Child and Family Services
Reviews Aggregate Report Round 3: FY
2015-2018

Importance of Connections

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- If kin can't provide a placement, child welfare agencies should encourage different ways kin can continue to be a part of the youth's life.
 - Technology (internet, cell phones, social media) is an important tool to strengthen and maintain connections with kin.
 - Foster youth who have immigrated should be supported to maintain connections with relatives abroad.
 - States must continue efforts to seek out and find kin connections throughout a child's time in foster care, not just when they enter care.
 - Maintaining relationships with relatives is especially helpful to keep young people connected to their cultural identity.





Essential Supports for Kin

- Some kin relationships may require focused support before placement would be appropriate.
- Kin relationships should be supported with meaningful opportunities for spending time together in natural settings.
- Kinship caregivers often need concrete resources and services that can continue indefinitely, beyond formal agency involvement, based on the needs of the family.
- If states prioritized kinship care by redirecting resources towards finding and supporting kin, less effort, time and resources would be needed for recruiting new foster homes.
- Without trauma education and support programs, many kinship placements disrupt. Many families reach out for support when they're on the brink of disruption. It would be ideal to have trauma education and support available from the start; to be proactive rather than reactive.
- Native families and families of color, who are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system, should be provided with additional supports to enable children and youth to achieve permanency with kin.



Supporting Relational Permanency

What is relational permanency and why is it important?

Legal permanency, achieved through reunification, guardianship or adoption is incredibly important, but it is not the the only way to provide a sense of belonging and meaningful connections for young people.

Agencies and courts should work to ensure that every young person who leaves foster care has relational permanency – meaning they have various long-term relationships that help them feel loved and connected. This could include relationships with siblings, family members, extended family, family friends, mentors, and former foster family members.

Relational permanency is fundamental to the well-being of children and youth. It strengthens legal permanence by securing important lifelong connections. Too many young people exit foster care without legal permanency, so focusing on relational permanency is critical for improving youth outcomes.

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Children and youth had adequate visits with their siblings who were placed separately in foster care in 66% of the cases reviewed.

States made concerted efforts to maintain the important connections of children and youth (school connections, siblings not in foster care, extended family, kin) in 69% of the cases reviewed.



Relationships are Key

- States have to place the same value on relational permanency as legal permanency.
- Youth need to know that maintaining and supporting their important relationships and connections is a priority to agencies and courts.
- There's a common misconception that family relationships are bad for foster youth, but the reality is family connections are helpful and important.
- Conversations with youth around permanency and meaningful connections shouldn't be a one-time thing; they must be ongoing.
- Agencies need to remain vigilant in proactively seeking out connections for youth throughout their time in foster care.

**85-93% of
19- and 21-year-old
NYTD survey
respondents had at
least one adult in their
lives to whom they
could go to for advice
or emotional support
(other than their
caseworker)**

*States should be
identifying and
actively supporting
these relationships for
youth during their
time in
foster care.*



Community Connections Matter

- The worst part of changing placements can be losing community connections. Friends, teachers, the lunch ladies at school, coaches and teammates - it is really painful to continually lose those connections as a young person grows up.
- It would be helpful if workers acknowledge how much kin and community relationships mean to young people in care. They should ask youth who they are connected to and develop a plan to be able to maintain those connections.
- Social workers need to understand that they have a large role in supporting relational permanency by taking the time to find placements that keep youth placed in their community of origin.
- Agencies should help caregivers ensure that youth stay connected to extracurricular and school activities such as band, sports, field trips and cultural events.

Workforce and Services

- Community based organizations that offer services that support relationships such as child-focused recruitment models, and programs that support foster parent and biological parent connections should be utilized more.
- Social workers are truly the backbone to the system as they directly interact with young people the most, so states should invest in the workforce. This would ensure that social workers can spend the time needed to develop relationships with youth and their kin connections in order to better support those relationships.



Visitation and Access to Electronic Communication

- Technology can and should be used to strengthen and maintain connections. To keep youth safe online, we should educate young people and their support network about the risks so that they can utilize technology safely.
- Visitation services are not adequately funded or prioritized into policy or practice. States should be required to make visitation accessible to youth (with parents, siblings and other connections).
- Social workers and attorneys should advocate for visitation plans that include consideration for electronic communication with kin.
- Families of color may lack sufficient access to internet so states must be diligent to ensure that access, as it is critical for maintaining connections.
- Foster parents should support a young person's safe access to internet and cell phones.





Mentoring Done Well – With Adults

- Mentorship can be very helpful, but the key is to be certain that those who fill the role of mentor have a clear understanding of what to expect regarding youth who have experienced foster care.
- Mentors must be adequately educated, prepared, and supported in that role – having good intentions and a willingness to support youth is not enough.
- Agencies should ensure that mentors and volunteers working with youth are matched appropriately to support positive and lasting relationships.
- States should consider how mentoring relationships can be sustained after a specific program ends so that those relationships can become lifelong connections.
- States should be recruiting a diverse array of mentors, from various cultural backgrounds, in order to meet the needs of youth in care.

Mentoring Done Well – With Peers

- Having a peer mentor helps young people know they are not alone in their experiences and that can be very transformative.
- Peer mentors can boost confidence, provide encouragement and give youth a sense of community.
- Promoting mentorship between former foster youth who have successfully transitioned out, and youth who are currently in the system, would provide the critical social and emotional support that is often lacking for a lot of youth.



Culture Matters

- Youth need opportunities to be able to form organic relationships with people who belong to the communities they identify with. This is especially important for youth of color who are living with people outside of their own culture.
- States should provide training to foster parents and caregivers on the importance of cultural connections, as well as cultural humility, recognition and awareness.
- We need to be asking “How are we honoring this young person's culture?” “How are we facilitating connections to their community?”
- Culture is a source of strength, a source of resilience and a source of pride and it should be preserved.

Data Collection

- States are not collecting adequate data about the relationships youth have with supportive adults and often only collect data on caregivers.
- States should improve data collection related to preserving connections so we know what connections are being identified and maintained for children and youth, what is happening with sibling placement and connections, and how relationships can be supported.





Youth Need Support to Build and Maintain Relationships

- Too often, young people lose many of their relationships throughout their foster care experience, and the trauma they have experienced may inhibit their ability to build new relationships.
- It's critical that states are ensuring young people have access to behavioral supports, such as trauma-informed counseling. This can aid in healing and can help young people build relationships that can be trusted again.

Peer Relationships are Important

- Relationships with peers (foster siblings and peers at school) are often some of the most meaningful connections youth have during their time in foster care, so they should be nurtured.
- States can help preserve peer connections by having more comprehensive policies and regulations for youth regarding time spent with other foster youth and friends, as well as phone and email access.



SUPPORTING SUCCESSFUL OLDER YOUTH ADOPTION

Adoption of older youth in foster care requires unique preparation and ongoing supports to ensure long-term well being for youth and their families.

In addition to exploring these important issues, the Youth Engagement Team offers additional reflections and recommendations about how agencies and courts can support meaningful engagement of youth in permanency planning.

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**There are 112,000
children and youth
waiting for adoption;
Over 19,000 are 14 or
older***

**47% of youth ages 14+
waiting for adoption
age out of care****

**Source: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
AND HUMAN SERVICES**
Administration for Children and Families
Children's Bureau
Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and
Reporting System (AFCARS)
*Data as of September 30, 2019
**Data as of June 23, 2020



"My experience has taught me that it's less about seamlessly bringing a child into your life, but more about compromise and growth; a blending of two worlds, two different experiences to make the life that is yours together as a family, with the recognition that each of you brings something else to that family."

The Right Perspective on Adoption

- We need a shift in mindset from *we are adopting this child* to, *we are adopting each other*, and blending and growing together.
- Adopting one another also means that potential adoptive parents need to be committed to their own personal and internal work, to learn and grow and understand what they are bringing into this new relationship.
- It's important to recognize that youth come with their own life experiences, their own trauma, their own relationships, and all of that needs to be honored when you are blending that family.
- There needs to be an emphasis on the fact that young people don't need to sever all of their attachments with their family and their culture and their friends just because they're being adopted.

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Adoption is not a destination, but the beginning of a journey together as a family.



Preparation is Important

- It's important to ensure that youth are connecting with potential adoptive families in a meaningful way at least a few times per week. Having consistent time to connect and get to know one another is necessary to evaluate whether the family is the right fit.
- There should be clear communication about transitions as youth prepare for adoption. Transitions can be hard to for young people and clear communication around the boundaries that both the family and the young person wants to set is important.
- States should have a way to measure whether or not a young person has established an appropriate bond with a potential permanent placement. It's important to find a way of evaluating the strength of the relationship because you can achieve legal permanency, but it will never last if there is no bond, if there is no relationship.

Older youth adoption is unique

- Older youth are more conscious about the difficult things they have experienced in their lives, and as a result they have unique needs related to processing what they are feeling and experiencing. It's important that we address those needs as part of preparing for permanency.
- From a developmental perspective, the teen years are unique and we need to prepare families for how to deal with typical teenager behaviors in addition to the complexities that come with being in foster care.
- It may take more time for older youth to build a lasting relationship, compared to younger children. This is why we need to ensure that we're providing ongoing support for both the young person as well as the family.



Preserving Connections

- For young people who have relationships with their birth families, it's important that some of those relationships stay the same, not only for social capital reasons, but because they can also be helpful resources for young people. So we should make sure that the system is prepared for appropriately supporting those relationships.
- In some situations, birth families could be a little too intrusive and we need to ensure that the youth and the adoptive family have the resources and skills to know how to deal with that.
- Many older youth in care have relationships and supports that have been established – whether it be with previous foster parents or others in their community. It's important that efforts are made to find adoptive homes in the same community in order to preserve those connections.
- States have a responsibility to do all they can to keep young people connected to any kin, and important peer connections. We should leverage technology to help keep youth and families connected, and to help establish new bonds.
- Educational stability is critical for young people, and keeping youth in their schools is one way to help maintain important peer connections. Oftentimes these peer connections can become long-term relationships, and they could even be considered as permanency options.
- A young person's culture, religion, and ethnicity plays a huge role in permanency. Adoptive parents should be trained in understanding the importance of these issues and how they can support and sustain a young person's identity after adoption.



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I almost said no to adoption because I didn't feel like I deserved the family. My adoptive family needed to meet me where I was at, which was a place of fear.

I was afraid of taking the step toward adoption because I didn't want to risk losing that relationship if things didn't work out.

Helping Youth Consider Adoption

- Many young people are initially not interested in exploring adoption for any number of important reasons. Engagement and exploration around each of these reasons is important to “unpack the no” for each young person.
- We must emphasize the importance of youth centered engagement and actually having conversations with youth so that they can understand what adoption might mean not only for them, but for other important relationships in their lives.
- Youth should be encouraged to consult with others about their adoption, not just their caseworker, their GAL or their foster parents.

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My adoption failed in part because I had too many unanswered questions about adoption and how that would impact my relationship with my sibling.



Trauma and Attachment

- It is important to have a comprehensive understanding of the trauma a young person has experienced and what attachment issues may already exist or could arise as we consider adoption as a permanency option.
- A young person's past trauma and difficulties with attachment may be getting in the way of their ability to nurture new relationships.
- In order to truly thrive, adoptive families need a combination of wraparound supports and the most important piece is intensive trauma education before, during and post placement.
- Specialized trainings on topics such as attachment, sensory needs and sexual abuse are critical for adoptive families. Oftentimes, training and assessment of sexual abuse (which may be identified years later for older youth) is ignored.
- The most common reasons for adoption disruptions have to do with difficulties dealing with behavioral issues. Families don't understand that often at the root of these issues are brain development changes that occur due to trauma and lack of attachment. Applying the same parenting techniques they would use for other children who don't come from foster care won't be effective. Specialized training is necessary.
- Too often, adoptive parents aren't equipped to know how to nurture the child's existing relationships, or support their ethnic/cultural background, which disrupts the child's sense of identity.



Child-Focused Recruitment

- Building relationships and allowing for more child-focused placement options helps secure long term relationships. States need to stop placing all the weight on the length of time the youth is in a placement to determine the fitness of a home, and rather place weight on the ability youth have to bond with their caregivers.
- States need to find innovative ways to recruit foster and adoptive families, such as using smaller caseloads to do child-specific recruitment and using technology-based recruitment with videos of older foster youth in action, showing prospective parents the things they love to do.



Supporting the Workforce

- In order for social workers within the child welfare system to successfully engage youth in considering whether adoption is the right goal for them, they must understand issues of attachment and trauma and know how to help young people understand those issues. Often workers lack the training they need to have those kinds of conversations with young people.
- States should provide ongoing trauma-informed training and child development training so social workers can recognize the child's trauma and effectively work with them towards their permanency goals.
- States can recruit peer mentors - those with personal experiences - to help support vulnerable conversations with foster youth in and out of foster care because they are relatable and can speak to their own experiences with adoption.
- Understanding how to lead and conduct youth centered discussions about adoption is a specific skill that we need to develop through training for caseworkers and GALs and other service providers within the child welfare system.

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I believe for many young people in care, fear and the process of healing are common barriers to achieving permanency.

What is so important to overcoming these challenges is the degree of sensitivity and compassion expressed by the adults that are involved in that young person's life. This might include case managers, court officials, family members, kin, and therapists.



Post-Adoption Support is Critical

- Once adoption is finalized, often supports for the family stop which could place children at risk. States should develop ways to ensure that youth and families can provide ongoing information to service providers about the status of their adoptive placement so that needs can be identified and met.
- Adoptive families may also need opportunities for respite. This is frequently provided for foster families, but rarely happens post-adoption for families.
- Adoptive families need easy access to high quality mental health services.
- Adoptive families often experience isolation because of their unique family experience. It is critical to create a supportive network of families who all understand one another and provide a sense of community. This is key to preventing adoption disruptions.
- Children and youth who are adopted also need a sense of connection with others – it is critical for healing and helps fight feelings of isolation.
- Adopted children and youth should receive age-appropriate trauma education to help them understand triggers, attachment issues and other important topics.
- Many adoptive families are desperately seeking additional supports and those supports need to be accessible long term. Many families feel abandoned by their licensing agency shortly after adoptions are finalized and they are unable to get adequate support services.

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Having a sense of community and a family that was well educated in trauma and attachment was what helped heal me. And I hope we can provide the same for others.



Helping Youth Understand Permanency Options

- Youth should have an understanding of the basics of what adoption is - not the “Disney” version of adoption we may see in the media, but what it really is and what it can mean throughout the whole process. It shouldn't be assumed that youth understand what adoption really is, what it can mean, or how it can serve them specifically.
- Youth deserve proper legal representation throughout the whole permanency process. We should not assume that they know the questions to ask. We should be giving them all the information we have in developmentally-appropriate explanations and guidance.
- States should prioritize young people's desires and clearly define the pros and cons to each permanency outcome. Disparities exist in permanency options – some of the services and supports that youth can access if they age out of care are not available for children who are adopted. It's important for youth and families to clearly understand all of the resources and supports that are tied to each permanency option.
- Caseworkers and GALs should sit down with youth and have an open and thorough discussion about adoption, what it means for them, as well as what other permanency outcomes are possible that the youth might want to explore. They should come with questions and push youth to explore for themselves whether it's the right choice for them. These discussions shouldn't just happen once - they should happen periodically throughout the case planning process.



Giving Youth a Voice in Case Planning

- Agencies should do more goal setting with youth during case planning. Helping young people identify the dreams that they aspire to reach should be a very active part of the case management process. Social workers, existing connections such as kin and mentors as well as adoptive parents, can help aid in goal setting.
- We cannot achieve successful legal permanency without relational permanency. States need to start intentionally exploring how to evaluate the relationships youth already have rather than just focusing on finding legal placement options. That starts with delivering services that allow youth opportunities develop their existing relationships, and listening to the youth and the families they come from.

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