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This special issue of Protecting Children, “Love and Belonging in Child Welfare”, highlights many of the nuanced practice and policy issues that support effective permanency planning and decision making with adolescents in foster care. Building strong and permanent family relationships with adolescents may seem counterintuitive to the adolescent developmental tasks of forming an individual identity and separating from family to find a place in the world. However, family permanence for adolescents in foster care is fundamentally the most critical outcome to be achieved—for if adolescents are to become successful adults, they must have a family from which to separate and to then rely on for a lifetime of support. In addition, young people in foster care need support to piece together their complex life histories so that they can begin to make peace with their past, feel more secure in the present, and move forward with planning their futures—including both permanency and transition planning.

Dianna Walters’ essay, “What Finding Permanency Means from a Youth Perspective,” eloquently describes the “roller coaster” of permanency planning for older youth in foster care. The process is not simple or straightforward; rather, it can be messy and complex and requires patience and hard work, both on the part of the young person and on the part of practitioners. For too long the field has not pushed hard enough to provide staff with the time and the skills to have the often difficult permanency-related conversations with older youth, focusing instead on the concrete tasks of preparing them to live on their own after foster care because they were assumed to be too old to be adopted, or because they did not want or were not ready for a family. But as Ms. Walters describes, permanency for youth is not limited to adoption. Permanency should be individually defined by each young person who is striving to create and strengthen the urgently needed permanent connections with family and caring adults that will sustain him or her throughout life.

In order to help young people sustain those permanent connections, child welfare practitioners need to challenge some long-held assumptions about older youth in foster care, including: Their most important needs are independent living skills. They have been so emotionally damaged by years in foster care that they cannot maintain permanent, loving family connections. They do not want a connection to their birth families because they were hurt in the past. No one will want to adopt them. The articles in this issue take a significant step toward confronting these assumptions and providing new ideas for working with young people to ensure lifelong, permanent family connections as they make the often difficult transition to adulthood.

In their article, “Independent Living Program Transformation in California: Lessons Learned about Working with Older Youth and Implications for Permanency,” Jenifer Agosti and Karen Lofts Jarboe document the outcomes of the California Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) on Independent Living Program Transformation and challenge the idea that youth are able to live
“independently” at age 18. Although this BSC was focused on improving independent living programs in California, the youth participants challenged their local child welfare systems to focus more broadly on creating permanent family relationships and connections for—and with—youth in foster care. Using the concept of “love and belonging—permanency for a lifetime,” these youth emphasized that a family exists not just until you’re 18; rather, a family is forever. It is, of course, helpful to provide young people with independent living skills, but those skills must be built upon a foundation of permanent connections to family and other supportive adults. This article highlights the leadership roles that young people can and should play in achieving permanency and in challenging the child welfare system to reflect and respond to previously-held limiting assumptions about the importance of family permanence to older youth in foster care.

In order to achieve and sustain permanent family connections, young people in foster care need to be emotionally and cognitively prepared to take the permanency journey. The article “Integrating Child Welfare and Mental Health Practices: Actualizing Youth Permanency Using the 3-5-7 Model” documents successful applications of the 3-5-7 Model, a therapeutic practice that creates a safe space for young people to grieve past losses in order to become part of supportive and permanent family relationships. Through their work with youth using the 3-5-7 Model, authors Darla L. Henry and Gregory Manning challenge the idea that children are not harmed by separation from their families—that birth parents who have lost their parental rights cannot change and that youth don’t want to be reconnected to a family that had past difficulties or that could not protect the youth from harm at a younger age. Susan Getman and Steve Christian’s “Reinstating Parental Rights: Another Path to Permanency?” challenges the traditional practice of not allowing children and older youth to safely seek out birth parents, whose rights have been terminated, until they turn 18. For some young people in foster care, adoption may not be a viable option, even though they may have been freed for adoption. As improved family finding and engagement efforts surface disconnected parents and family members, youth may desire to safely reconnect with a birth parent, both emotionally and legally. This article highlights the growing work in several states to allow youth and birth parents to sustain these reconnections by safely reinstating parental rights. This may not become a widespread
practice, but the initial success stories indicate that it can be a possibility on a case by case basis for some youth to have greater opportunities for permanence.

The final article focuses on adoption, a more traditional form of permanence, but one that is often overlooked for older youth in foster care. In “Adopt Cuyahoga’s Kids: Securing Adoptive Placements for Older Youth in Cuyahoga County’s Public Child Welfare System,” authors Sue Pearlmutter, Victor Groza, Teresa Garafolo, and Betsie Norris demonstrate that older youth can be successfully adopted through engaging in youth-specific recruitment practices and creating community partnerships to support youth and families through the adoption process and beyond.

Conclusion

While the numbers of children and youth in foster care have decreased dramatically over the past decade, the numbers of adolescents aging out of foster care without having achieved legal permanence through reunification, adoption, or guardianship has incrementally increased from 17,300 youth in 1998 to 29,000 in 2009 (AFCARS). Studies consistently document poor outcomes for older youth who age out of the foster care system without permanent families committed to support the transition to adulthood. They are more likely than their non-foster care peers to be involved with the criminal justice system, have low educational attainment, become pregnant, experience homelessness, and lack health insurance (Kerman et al., 2009). Additionally, young people who leave foster care at age 18 are, as adults, more likely to require long-term government support and experience life-long difficulties (National Governors’ Association, 2010).

Thus, there is an urgent need to ensure that this growing number of adolescents at risk of aging out be more strategically engaged in building permanent family relationships committed to providing “love and belonging for a lifetime.”

Our search for articles for this special edition of Protecting Children, “Love and Belonging for a Lifetime: Youth Permanency in Child Welfare”, brought forth an array of promising practices and policies that support innovative, youth-centered permanency planning and decision making. While this is a good beginning, more nuanced research is needed to deepen our understanding of what it takes to engage youth as leaders in their own planning and decision making; to determine which practices work best with which youth and families to achieve and sustain meaningful and lasting permanent family relationships; and to document the impact on rates and quality of youth permanence of emerging practices involving the family finding, family group decision making, and sibling connections provisions of the 2008 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions legislation now being implemented across the country.

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- All the youth in foster care who have created permanent connections and those who are still searching. We hope these articles help transform child welfare systems so that all children and youth will not only have permanency, but will know love and belonging for a lifetime.
References


What Finding Permanency Means from a Youth Perspective

Dianna Walters

Dianna Walters is a foster youth alumni who spent 9 years in the foster care system before aging out without a family. She joined the Youth Leadership Advisory Team at age 16 and became very active within a couple of years. Ms. Walters has given testimony at legislative hearings in support of legislation impacting foster youth in areas such as education and sibling relationships. She has spoken on panels at trainings in the State of Maine for child welfare professionals in the child protective and legal community. She served as a member on the New England Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Adolescent Permanency and has been an active member of the Central Office Permanency Team since February of 2008. Ms. Walters advocates passionately for permanency for all foster youth and was even given the opportunity to do so on Capitol Hill in Washington DC last summer. As a Foster Youth Intern in Senator John Kerry’s office, Ms. Walters worked to raise awareness about issues facing foster youth across the country and worked with the other Foster Youth Interns to publish and present policy recommendations for the national child welfare system.

Professionally, Ms. Walters has worked with homeless and at-risk adolescents for the past three years and loves working one on one with youth facing similar challenges as she did when she was a teenager. As giving back has always been her goal, Ms. Walters studied Social and Behavioral Sciences with a counseling concentration at the University of Southern Maine and earned a B.A. in May of 2008. Ms. Walters has struggled with hearing so many similar stories from the young people she works with who have been in the child welfare system and wants to do more for these youth by improving the system in any way she can. For this reason, Ms. Walters is pursuing a Master’s degree in Public Policy and Management at the Muskie School of Public Service in Portland, Maine. Ms. Walters is focusing on child welfare policy and has been conducting research for the Cutler Institute on Health and Social Policy as a graduate assistant and a contracted researcher. Ms. Walters is hopeful to spend her career impacting child welfare policy and the lives of foster youth across the nation.

There was a little girl who was abandoned by her mother and spent her childhood riding around from state to state in the back seat of her father’s car with her sister. At age 12, she was taken into the custody of one of these states when someone noticed that she and her sister were not being cared for in the way they should have been. She thus lost the only family she had ever known and spent her teenage years feeling lost, alone, and unloved. Although she eventually became a self-sufficient young adult, she was left yearning for a sense of belonging that only a family could provide. The young woman reunited with an aunt who lived 900 miles away and spent almost 10 years building a relationship that she now finally knows will last a lifetime. She also found the woman who abandoned her and is still making peace with the fact that this woman will never be the mother she should be. This young woman has struggled to build connections and a network of support that would tear down the walls of isolation she felt for so very long. She is still fighting to be an aunt to her sister’s children — children who do not know their mother, either.
She knows that family is vitally important, as her life has been characterized by the powerful impacts that her own experiences with family have had upon her. Nothing is more important to her than her sister, her aunt, her niece, her nephew, and others who have become her family over the years.

This is just a story of one girl’s journey toward permanency. There are so many more stories like this one, many of which are unfolding as you read these words. These journeys should not be undertaken alone: no young person should have to walk this journey without a guiding light and a cushion to catch them if they should stumble along the way.

Many child welfare professionals talk about permanency for youth as though everyone knows what it is and understands it in the same way. Of course, we need to call it something in order to discuss it; one wouldn’t easily be able to talk about permanency if there weren’t a name for it. However, we must all take care when we have a discussion about permanency—particularly with young people in need of permanency—that we are at least on the same page about what the term means in the context of that discussion. The concept of permanency can be compared to the concept of love, in that most people define these concepts differently, prescribe various meanings to the concepts, and experience these concepts in quite unique ways. When we consider the group of older foster youth, who often struggle the most to find permanency, comparing the concept of permanency to that of love is useful yet again. I know of many teenagers, myself included, who just instinctively knew that they were in love and felt convinced that they would never love anyone else as much as they loved that one person. I also was not alone as a teenager in having people in my life who loved me dearly, although I did not see it in this way until I was much older and able to reminisce about my past.

Many young people see their friends as providing them with a sense of permanency, while they may not view an adult who is willing to make a lifelong commitment to them as being an option for a permanent connection. For instance, I had a history teacher who offered to open his home to me when I was 14 years old and I declined, not understanding the situation fully until I was much older. I also remember envisioning my college graduation as being attended by my large group of friends who were like a family to me. Not one of them showed up. Although this is not the place to argue for any particular definition of permanency, I feel that it is important to urge people to be mindful of the complexity of the concept. When working with a young person in need of permanency, it is vital to work together in defining the term in an operational way so that it may serve as the foundation of the work to ensue. This dialogue must be carried out in language that is youth friendly and developmentally appropriate. The resulting definition needs to be one that the young person understands and one that is respectful of how the young person defines permanency and what is most important to him or her.

Having discussions about permanency and what it means brings up a lot of feelings about the past for a young person. Even if the conversation is part of a discussion about child welfare systems working to improve the number of young people who achieve permanency, a young person cannot help but make connections to past experiences. If the conversation is part of a discussion about that particular young person’s own permanency plans for the future, these past experiences come to mind to the fullest extent possible. Although I never engaged in structured and supported permanency work myself, being part of systems-level work, with respect to permanency, made me realize what I had been missing and led me to begin my own permanency planning. Once young people begin thinking about permanency in their futures, they might think about the
lost connections that left spaces in their lives, voids that urgently need to be filled. Most young people in foster care feel these voids and wish they weren’t there, but either may not be aware of them, or may not be able to articulate the gaps, until they begin thinking and talking about permanency. Addressing lost relationships and connections that were supposed to be permanent is a critical piece of work—work that must be done before youth can look forward to the permanent connections in their futures. The emotions that come with an experience of loss, such as sadness, grief, anger, betrayal, fear, and confusion, all come to the surface as a young person considers permanency. Many older youth in foster care have developed means of coping that often lead to outward presentations that drastically differ from what they are feeling underneath their external appearances. Professionals must develop a level of trust and comfort with a young person before accepting what they see on the surface. Working with young people to address and find peace with their pasts is a necessary step in finding permanency and is a step that may occur concurrently with permanency planning itself.

Once a young person has found potential permanent connections, there are many areas in which the young person needs support. Preparing youth for permanent, lifelong relationships is vital to the success of their future networks of support. It is so easy for a young person to go into such a situation with overly high or drastically low expectations. Some youth have virtually romanticized the idea of a healthy family and have high hopes, believing that if they only had a family, everything would be okay. Others have done just the opposite and have been so scarred by their past losses that they struggle to allow anyone close to them, fearing what such close positioning can allow someone to do to their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Lack of trust and apprehensiveness in many foster youth lead to a tendency to hurt the people who are close, either by pushing these people away or testing to see whether they will leave. It may also be the case that once youth feel safe in a relationship, they will finally let go of all the things they have been holding back, believing that they are in a safe place to do so and that they have some support. Continuing to provide a safe space and support for youth to manage their expectations, process their fears and concerns, and communicate about their relationships will increase the successes they find in building lifelong families and networks of support.

While these are some of the aspects that come to mind when asked about what it means to find permanency, I am sure there are many others left unmentioned due to matters of space and my own personal and unique perspective. Finding permanency can be at once so many things to a young person in or from the foster care system. The permanent networks of family, community, and other social supports—which many do not even recognize as potential sources of trauma and pain—have been exactly this for most of these young people. Finding permanency can bring a person to the highest of imaginable highs, and then drop her to the loneliest imaginable state. It can leave a person feeling invigorated, discouraged, supported, isolated, healed, and re-victimized. Despite all the pitfalls that may occur and the hard work that must be done, finding permanency is more vital to the life of a young person than finding a job, car, or apartment. These material things mean little without the connections that make humans the interdependent beings they are. While finding permanency may be like a roller coaster ride in which a person is smiling with joy one second and clutching onto the bars in fear the next, if there is someone there next to him, supporting him through the ride, then any young person can make it to the end. But the end of this ride allows the passenger to walk off feeling not loneliness, but support; not fear, but trust; and not desolate, but confident in knowing that there will always be someone to turn to for help riding all the other rides of life to come.
Independent Living Program Transformation in California: Lessons Learned about Working with Older Youth and Implications for Permanency

Karen Lofts Jarboe and Jen Agosti

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From July 2008 through May 2010, nine counties in California participated in a Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) focused on transforming their Independent Living Programs (ILP). Over the course of this BSC, these counties worked together under the guidance of project staff and California-based content trainer/faculty members that included both young people who had been in foster care and caregivers in order to fundamentally change the way they provided independent living services to older youth.

While traditional Independent Living Programs are focused on helping youth attain the skills they need to live on their own, this project demonstrated that the real focus of ILP must be on helping to ensure that, while youth are being provided many essential skills to help them in life, no youth should ever need to be prepared to go through life alone. Instead, the ILP system should strive to ensure that every youth has love and belonging—permanency for a lifetime.

This article describes how understanding this key concept unfolded, along with some of the key practices that were tested and implemented to support the move from permanency as one single element of ILP to permanency as the essential foundation for ILP.

Part I: Background and Overview

California’s Challenge Related to ILP

The transition to adulthood and economic independence can be challenging for any adolescent and generally occurs over many years, with substantial support from family and friends. In fact, nearly half of youth aged 18 to 24 in the United States live at home (Jekielek & Brown, 2005) and most young adults in their early 20s continue to receive substantial economic support from their parents (Schoeni & Ross, 2005). In contrast, when youth in foster care turn 18, they transition out of the system, often with only minimal preparation for life on their own, and without the ongoing supports that would support them in becoming happy, productive adults.
California has approximately 20,000 foster youth\(^1\) who are 15 years and older and who are involved with either the juvenile justice system or child welfare-supervised foster care (University of California Berkeley/California Department of Social Services, 2010). Once “emancipated” from the system, these foster youth will face daunting odds. Research has shown that over half of youth aging out of foster care have not graduated from high school, 25% have become homeless at least once, and nearly 60% are unemployed 12 to 18 months after leaving the system. Many suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, and too many leave the system without any connection to an adult, family, or community (McCoy-Roth, Freundlich, & Ross, 2010).

In 2006, largely in response to these data, California was one of six states chosen to participate in a National Governor’s Association (NGA) Policy Academy on Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care. The Academy, which ran from June 2006 through December 2007, provided a unique opportunity for teams of state leaders to work with national and state experts to help improve outcomes for youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood. California’s NGA team, under the leadership of the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), brought together a broad representation of state leadership, state partners, and advocacy organizations, including the Employment Development Department, California Workforce Investment Board, Education/Foster Youth Services, Mental Health, Community Colleges, County Welfare Director’s Association, Child and Family Policy Institute of California, California Youth Connection, Casey Family Programs, California Permanency for Youth Project, New Ways to Work, California Connected by 25, CASA, First 5, and others. Most importantly, the NGA team incorporated input and recommendations from youth through the advocacy of the California Youth Connection (CYC); this inclusion recognized that foster youth are the experts of how the system operates and whether or not their needs are being met.

Through an inclusive interdisciplinary process focused on addressing the challenges faced by transition-aged foster youth, the NGA Policy Academy for Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care provided an opportunity to assess current efforts in California, make recommendations, and implement changes to systematically address key challenges and improve transition outcomes. This process resulted in a new vision for California’s Independent Living Programs.

**Using a Breakthrough Series Collaborative to Support ILP Transformation in California**

The Breakthrough Series Collaborative (“BSC” or “Collaborative”) methodology was identified as an effective approach that could help counties in California translate NGA’s recommendations and vision into action. The goal was to redefine and reshape programs and services promoting permanency and preparation for adulthood that is developmental in nature and related to older youth in care (15 and older) served by ILP programs in California.

The BSC methodology was developed by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement and was introduced to child welfare as a practice improvement methodology by Casey Family Programs. It brings together teams that are focused on a common challenge—in this case, transforming ILP—over a period of roughly 22 months. During this time, the participants of all teams come together during four in-person Learning Sessions to learn from faculty content trainers as well as from one another. Teaching and experiential activities immerse participants in various aspects of the topic and provide participants with an understanding of how changes can be quickly tested, shared with and adapted from other teams, implemented, spread, and replicated.

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\(^1\) LP in California serves youth in both child welfare and probation-supervised foster care; therefore, the term “foster youth” is used inclusively throughout this document to refer to both populations.
At the heart of this change methodology is the notion that practices and processes can be improved rapidly on a small scale using small tests of change that are transformed into broader practice improvements. A common mantra in BSCs is, “What can you do by next Tuesday?” For example, in finding creative ways to engage youth in conversations about possible lifelong connections in their lives, one county asked a youth who her “favorite five” numbers were in her cell phone. Based on the positive response this had, this single question blossomed into a more comprehensive practice in which workers began to use less “traditional” questions in helping youth identify those who were important in their lives (e.g., “Who’s in your cell phone?”; “Who have you friended on Facebook in the last few weeks?”; and “Who have you texted this week?”).

In this Collaborative teams of youth, caregivers, county child welfare agencies, education partners, employment partners, and others from the community at all levels tested these types of small scale, rapid changes to begin transforming the way services and supports were provided to older youth in foster care. The teams were selected through an application process and came from nine counties (Fresno, Los Angeles, Monterey, Napa, Orange, Sacramento, Santa Clara, San Francisco, and Solano) across California. Roughly 120 participants on the nine teams shared ideas, practices, documents, and findings with one another on a secure website, on monthly conference calls, and at four two-day meetings convened every five to six months. The teams worked to expand their successful practices across their counties as they moved from their existing ILP practices to a vision of transformation. A small planning team and faculty from across the state guided the teams in making iterative changes in three critical practice areas: permanency, education, and employment.

**Part II: Moving from Three Critical Practice Areas to Three Foundational Outcomes**

The three critical practice areas—permanency, education, and employment—were known as the three “pillars.” Initially, there was agreement that all were equally important and required a careful balance to ensure that none would have primacy. But over time, a different picture emerged—one in which the focus was not on practice areas, but instead was on achieving three foundational outcomes: 1) ensure that every youth has love and belonging—permanency for a lifetime; 2) empower youth to take charge of their lives and futures; and 3) provide youth all they need to live, love, learn, and work.

This picture developed in a variety of ways: through facilitated activities, typically developed and led by youth faculty members at the in-person Learning Sessions; through coaching of county teams by youth faculty; through continued conversations between Learning Sessions that involved all youth faculty members and adult faculty members; and through youth affinity group gatherings on phone calls and in person. These continuous and highly visible activities and conversations illuminated and emphasized common experiences of youth in care. As they did so, they allowed adult partners to see and connect with how their own practices, systems, and behaviors often result in youth not being able to achieve the three foundational outcomes.

**OUTCOME 1: Ensure that Every Youth Has Love and Belonging—Permanency for a Lifetime**

As teams worked on each pillar separately, it was clear that older youth still did not have access to key permanency resources, despite a newfound emphasis on education and employment. Youth had few connections who were not paid staff on whom they could rely. As a result, their ability to focus on education and employment goals proved
challenging as their personal lives, without these more permanent and reliable connections, often remained chaotic.

“Permanency is a foundation — like going from artificial turf to natural grass under their [youths’] feet.”

— Monterey County

As teams worked on each pillar separately, it was clear that older youth still did not have access to key permanency resources, despite a newfound emphasis on education and employment. Youth had few connections who were not paid staff on whom they could rely. As a result, their ability to focus on education and employment goals proved challenging as their personal lives, without these more permanent and reliable connections, often remained chaotic.

“Belonging is everything — professionally, on a state or county team, in a transformation process, in a family or home . . . ‘Belong’ enforces the sense of community and humanity vs. just individual focus.”

— Youth Faculty

While staff may talk about improving educational and employment goals for youth in foster care, youth themselves say that they ultimately need a solid family or permanency foundation to support their success in life. Youth faculty members and participants gave language to this, saying that “love and belonging—permanency for a lifetime” is what they needed to help develop relationships, make connections in their community and world, and develop daily living skills as other youth do in their homes. This became the first of three fundamental principles guiding ILP transformation, for without this, improvements in the areas of education and employment would be difficult, if not impossible.

OUTCOME 2: Empower Youth to Take Charge of Their Lives and Futures

Youth faculty and participants in the Collaborative clearly defined what they needed in order to be successful in life. They told adults they wanted to be able to “take charge of their lives and futures.” This became the second foundational outcome.

Youth described, in their own words, the need to be thought of as individuals and to not have standard cookie-cutter approaches applied to their lives; to have the multitude of paid professionals involved in their lives talk to one another and not expect them to interact with each of the professionals separately; to be treated “just like other kids who aren’t in foster care”; to get what they need through real-life experiences and relationship—such as their peers—and not from books, guides, checklists, or in classes; and to be connected to the things they need in life, rather than being left to find things for themselves.

This resulted in a clarification of terms, including “youth-centered” and “youth-adult partnership,” two critical terms that emerged as this work developed. “Youth-centered” ensures a focus on each individual youth and all aspects of the youth’s life. A youth-centered system engages youth, their families, communities, caregivers, and other important adults identified by the youth in planning and in activities that build youths’ relationships and skills and that help them to negotiate the real world. When youth and the adults around them are acting within a youth-centered framework, youth are critically involved in all decisions about their own lives. Their self-identified strengths, needs, goals, and aspirations remain in the center of the planning and activities, rather than drifting to the periphery and allowing agency and organizational rules and constraints to guide decisions about their lives.

“Youth-adult partnerships” support individual youth development and provide relationship-based exchanges that benefit both youth
and the adults. Through this process, adults experience youth voice and insights, wishes and dreams, and the skills and expertise that youth have with respect to their futures, while youth simultaneously have the support and experience of adults they can turn to for guidance as they take charge of their lives. Self-advocacy and voice are important in this process, and must be taught to youth and adults alike. These skills can evolve to create powerful, effective, and successful youth-adult partnerships where youth are true partners and leaders in their own lives, within the programs they access, and within their communities.

**OUTCOME 3: Provide Youth All They Need to Live, Love, Learn, and Work**

Although practices being tested by teams were becoming more youth-centered and were using more youth-adult partnership approaches, these practices and the basic ILP work was still being done in the same formal settings (such as classrooms), settings that dramatically differed from locations in which youth who were not residing in foster care could learn the same skills (such as at home with family and in community).

Most daily skill development happens at home in the context of family relationships. This is a normal part of adolescent development. Despite this acknowledgement, it was difficult for teams to stop the practice of conducting these skill-building sessions in ILP classrooms. Counties have contracts with providers; caregiver training resources are not prepared to step in and make the shift needed; and youth in foster care do not know there are other options, so they do not demand anything different. Throughout the Collaborative youth leaders and participants moved beyond programs and services to identify concrete needs not only for daily living, which tends to be the primary focus of most existing ILPs, but also for relationship development, ongoing learning and education, and current and future work and careers. This resulted in the identification of a third foundational outcome:

**“provide youth all they need to live, love, learn, and work.”** This means that youth get what they need where they need it—from families and communities, rather than from paid staff in a classroom setting.

**Part III: Moving from Foundational Outcomes to Practices**

These three foundational outcomes were essential in helping teams focus on making all of their work truly youth-centered, with youth-adult partnerships at the core. Not only does the BSC methodology focus on and accelerate practice changes, but ILP transformation required them.
Thus, the simultaneous work of the teams was on testing and developing practices to help begin to actualize this transformed system.

As teams tested practices to move toward this transformed system, most were clearly grouped into one of the three foundational outcomes. But six emerged as overarching practices upon which all else were grounded.

These six practices can be thought of as the “essential building blocks” for transforming practice. They form the foundation for all other work, as they are focused on building relationships, engaging and supporting people, and working with others in true partnership.

While these building blocks are interrelated and are part of all other strategies that emerged, they are significant in that transformation cannot happen without all six being solidly in place.

The six building blocks for practice are shown below:

1. **Don’t Stop Asking** *(Finding Family for Youth in Creative & Constant Ways)* — Supporting every youth to have “love and belonging—permanency for a lifetime” is fundamental for youth to achieve success in life. Everyone has family somewhere, and finding these family members in partnership with youth is a key factor in supporting their sense of belonging in life. Teams focused on explaining to youth why they were being asked about friends and close contacts; exploring the concepts of love and belonging with youth; ensuring that youth are prepared and supported in these discussions, especially around issues related to grief and loss; using creative ways to facilitate conversations about who is important to youth; using tools such as Permanency Pacts, “relationship webs,” and tools developed by the
California Permanency for Youth Project; asking caregivers, teachers, and others connected with the youth about the youths’ connections; and working with the youth to review their own case records.

2. **Are You Ready? (Preparing Youth for Planning Processes & Meetings)** — Preparing youth for planning and decision-making processes and team meetings increases youth participation in the following ways: attendance in meetings; active participation in meetings; the ability to take charge and lead the meetings; guiding the decisions that are made at the meetings; and following through on the decisions that are made. Teams did this in a variety of ways, including meeting with youth individually to discuss roles, responsibilities, expectations, and goals; holding joint meetings between youth and caregivers focused on the same; focusing on youth’s strengths, hopes, dreams, and aspirations; partnering with youth to identify others they would like to have present; working with youth to extend the invitation to these members of their circles of support; connecting youth with peer mentors and adult allies for support; and crafting the agendas jointly with youth.

3. **Appreciate Who We Are! (Using Appreciative Inquiry in Working with Youth and Others)** — Youth hold the keys to their lives and futures. Engaging youth and trusted adults in the process of appreciative inquiry connects others with what youth know and experience so that youth can get what they need to live, love, learn, work, and thrive. Teams aimed to develop strength-focused questions based on what would work well for youth and their dreams; to teach, encourage, and support caregivers and other partners to use these types of questions in their work with youth; to train and support facilitators to use these types of questions during meetings; and to ensure that the responses to these questions would be used to inform all other work with youth. Solution-focused inquiry and Signs of Safety practices provide many tools that were used by teams as they did this work.

4. **Listen to Me! (Reaching Out, Speaking Up, and Advocating for Yourself)** — Youth need to develop self-advocacy skills in order to evolve into leaders in their lives. Adults supporting this development will strengthen youth in their abilities to take charge of their futures to get what they need and want. Through the process of supporting self-advocacy skills, the youth-adult partnership will be strengthened. Teams used a self-advocacy curriculum, which was developed by BSC youth faculty members; developed and engaged peer mentors and youth leaders to facilitate this work with other youth; provided safe opportunities for youth to practice these skills; validated youths’ efforts; and had youth leaders facilitate this work with adult partners in a variety of forums.

5. **Move Over, Partner (Preparing Adults to Be True Partners with Youth)** — A key to transformation is shifting away from adult-led planning and decision making to youth-centered planning and decision making in the youth-adult partnership. This youth-centered partnership requires adults to step aside and make room for youth as partners. To do this work, teams tested many practices, including working with adult partners to ensure they understood the purpose, expectations, roles, and goals in youth-adult partnerships, including caregivers; working with youth to identify potential adult partners from their circles of support; teaching and preparing adult partners to work with youth in the identification of and focus on youths’
Caregivers as Connectors: In one county, a caregiver worked with a youth in his care to develop a list of possible connections in his life. The list was not developed solely through standard social worker questions; instead, it developed over time, as many people were mentioned by the youth as his relationship with the caregiver developed.

The caregiver then asked the youth if he would like to try to connect or reconnect with any of these individuals. The youth was anxious and asked the caregiver if he would make the call. The caregiver agreed and called the youth’s grandmother while the youth listened on speaker phone. When asked about this initial call, the caregiver said, “It was a little scary at first to do the first initial steps. It felt kind of weird because I felt the social worker should do this but we have to at least try it.”

This first call opened the door to the redevelopment of a relationship between the youth and his grandmother. The second call was a breakthrough in which the grandmother said she wanted to see the youth and become a permanent part of his life. The caregiver then worked to prepare the youth for what the initial contact might feel like, understanding his hopes, concerns, and how he would be able to deal with different situations that might arise. As the relationship continued to develop between the youth and his grandmother, the caregiver continued to provide emotional support and, within several months, the youth was planning to move in with the grandmother permanently.

The strategies and practices that are described in the following sections in each of the three foundational outcome areas are all predicated on these six essential building blocks. In reviewing the practices below, it is critical to note that they

priorities and goals; developing structures and processes that support the partnership and are comfortable for youth; focusing on youths’ strengths; and teaching adult partners about youth self-advocacy and support.

6. There for Me (Supporting Caregivers in Working with Youth) — Caregivers have dual roles, both as providers of service (caring for youth) and receivers of service (receiving support from counties to care for youth). Caregivers are asked to provide youth with physical care; nurture and support youth; teach life skills at home and in the community; advocate for youths’ needs related to permanency, education, and employment; transport and support youth in plans and decision making about their futures; and form familial-type relationships with youth. These roles are complex, daily, and involve relationships that are at the same time both loving and conflicted; thus, caregivers experience the need for support and resources. Teams held joint meetings between youth and their caregivers early and often; followed up with caregivers about roles they could/should play in a youth’s life; ensured that caregivers had the skills needed to talk with youth about their rights, to use appreciative inquiry, to develop youths’ self-advocacy capacity, to facilitate youths’ life-skills development, to help connect youth with family, and to access resources for the youth and for themselves; helped caregivers understand adolescent development and negotiate the challenges that naturally arise; and developed toolkits and resource guides for caregivers to use in working with youth.

The strategies and practices that are described in the following sections in each of the three foundational outcome areas are all predicated on these six essential building blocks. In reviewing the practices below, it is critical to note that they
cannot be fully implemented unless the building blocks are firmly embedded in all work with youth and families first.

**OUTCOME 1: Ensure that All Youth Have Love and Belonging—Permanency for a Lifetime: PRACTICES**

This theme differed from the more traditional child welfare term “permanency” in that it emphasized the need for love and belonging in life beyond a legal term that was sometimes deemed “meaningless” to many youth involved in the Collaborative. Moreover, the term “permanency” from the youths’ perspectives often meant more than a single parenting-type relationship. Youth in the Collaborative described that their sense of place in the world could derive from multiple relationships, including parenting relationships, siblings, extended family members, and others who are important in their lives.)—“Love and belonging—permanency for a lifetime” refers to belonging to a family that provides unconditional love, is continuous, permanent, secure, consistent, and fulfilling.

There were nine key strategies that Collaborative teams ultimately tested and implemented focused on “love and belonging—permanency for a lifetime” as shown below.

a. **Let’s Talk! (Having Conversations with Youth about Their Relationships)** — Youth are experts at knowing about their current and past relationships. Developing interesting, comfortable, and informal ways to discuss loving relationships with youth often results in more positive outcomes in which youth are able to identify important relationships in their lives, including those that might be further developed. Teams used and adapted existing tools, such as “Permanency Pacts” (Foster Club, 2010), and ensured that their
conversations with youth were jargon-free. They also recognized the need for staff to develop specific skills in having these informal, non-threatening, and important conversations with youth.

b. **Discovery (Reviewing Case Files to Identify Meaningful Relationships)**

— Documentation in child welfare is extensive; thus, it is not a surprise that case files and court reports are laden with information about youths’ connections. Although youth may have been provided copies of court reports, youth who have been in care for extended periods of time often do not have these documents in their hands, as they have usually been left behind somewhere. Even when they have them, the youth may not have read them, as understanding them often requires a supportive adult to assist in the process of reading and interpreting the documentation.

As a result, youth often do not have a clear sense of their own histories and lives because they are not afforded the opportunity to review their own court reports or case files. Through a supported process of reading these documents, youth may not only gain a better sense of themselves and their own background, but may also be able to engage in a more open dialogue with workers about possible relationships they might like to explore or re-open. As youth do this, it is critical that they are prepared for and supported in the feelings of grief and loss they may experience.

c. **Everyday People (Using Creative Ways to Identify Relationships)**

— Child welfare protocol often dictates asking youth fairly directive questions about with whom they would like to live. Teams in the Collaborative realized that while these directive questions had a role and were important, they did not help staff to identify other important people in youths’ lives, including the broader network of individuals who might provide support, love, and belonging. So teams asked their youth members the best ways to identify relationships, and youth suggested looking at names listed in their cell phones (“favorite five numbers”); friends on their Facebook pages; and employing questions such as, “Who would you call at 2:00 in the morning if your car broke down somewhere?” or “Who would you want to see sitting in the front row of your high school/college graduation?” rather than more traditional questions about placement.

**Complex Webs of Relationships:** One county team regularly used life books to help youth reflect on their pasts and move toward the future. In addition to the life books, the team developed a tool they called “relationship webs” to help youth visually see all the relationships they had in their lives. By helping youth think broadly about the relationships they have in all different aspects of their lives (family, friends, education, work, healthcare, where they live, etc.) youth could see in a very graphic way how many opportunities exist for them.

After creating a life book with one youth, the team began working on a relationship web with her at a Life Conference. In doing so, she began thinking about permanency in a new way. She used it not only to identify connections, but also to think about whom she might want to reach out and reconnect with. After doing some outreach, she reconnected with a former teacher, with whom she began pursuing permanent placement.
Youth reminded staff that permanent connections and lifelong love and belonging should not only include those who might play a parenting role. Thinking creatively in order to identify these relationships also opened new opportunities to think creatively about various permanent roles people could play in the lives of youth.

d. **Brothers-Sisters (Sustaining Sibling Connections)** — One of the greatest senses of connection for most youth, regardless of placement status, is siblings. Yet when youth are in placement, they often are separated from and ultimately lose touch with their siblings through no fault of their own. This separation not only deepens the trauma of removal, but it also takes away those who are critical parts of the youth’s identity and lifelong connections. Finding various ways to help youth reconnect and maintain these connections provides a critical opportunity for them to maintain these relationships that contribute to their sense of love and belonging. This practice comprised including specific rights about siblings in Foster Care Bill of Rights; discussing sibling rights with youth, caregivers, providers, and staff; giving youth options about sibling visits; and following up with staff about these visits.

e. **Caregiver Connectors (Caregivers Supporting Youth Connections)** — Caregivers and the youth who live with them have a distinctive relationship. As a result, caregivers are uniquely positioned to help youth identify and connect with other important people in their lives. This not only allows youth to have support while reaching out and making (or re-making) connections, but it also provides support to the youth while new (and old) relationships are developing and ideally providing the youth with a deeper sense of love and belonging.

f. **The Heart of the Matter (Making Love and Belonging Central)** — “Life Conferences,” which are called a variety of things depending on the county including “Emancipation Conferences,” “Transition Planning Meetings,” and “My Time Meetings,” typically focus on specific skills youth need after they leave the foster care system, such as education, employment, general life skills, etc. But having a sense of “love and belonging—permanency for a lifetime” is foundational to addressing these skills. Rather than separating out the concept of “permanency” in separate meetings, infusing all meetings that focus on youths’ futures with the idea of “love and belonging—permanency for a lifetime” assures better achievement of success for all.

g. **Pursuing Permanency (Using Permanency Tools and Resources)** — In order for youth to be leaders in the conferences described above, they must be well prepared and understand the language that is being used. Rather than the onus being on the youth to understand formal permanency lingo, the onus is on the staff to speak in terms that are clear and transparent. Using permanency tools that have been adapted for and by youth were found by teams to be a solid way to do this. Teams used tools such as the Permanency Pact and relationship webs to identify youths’ circles of support and life connections. Teams also adapted non-permanency tools, including Career Development Plans, to incorporate questions about lifelong connections into youths’ career goals, dreams, and pathways.

h. **I Belong (Preparing Youth for Permanency)** — It is driven by and is responsive to youth and encompasses birth families, extended family members, non-related family, and other family as identified by youth, caregivers, and community.
Maintaining, reconnecting, or forming new loving relationships can lead to emotional times for youth as they revisit loss and grief experiences. Teams collaborated with mental health providers to ensure that youth were prepared for the entire gamut of emotions they would experience as they discussed, moved toward, and ultimately achieved permanency; they established a network of supportive people, as identified by youth, to provide support to youth during the process; they created safe opportunities for youth to deal with the feelings that emerged; and they used concrete practices, such as the 3-5-7 Model, to help youth process their feelings.

Each of these strategies included practices that helped youth discuss, identify opportunities for, and attain this critically important sense of love and belonging.

**OUTCOME 2: Empower Youth to Take Charge of Their Lives and Futures: PRACTICES**

Youth in placement often feel a total lack of control about their lives. They are removed from their homes and are typically given little input into where they will live. Although they may be expressed interest in finding family, but he was worried about rejection and wanted to keep family members at a distance, even if he found them. He said, “I don’t know about ever having a relationship with any of them. I just want to know where they are.”

Together, they did significant work to prepare the youth for finding and connecting with these relatives. The progression was long and focused on addressing grief and loss issues (using strategies such as the 3-5-7 Model) as the family exploration was being done—before they were ever brought together. It helped the youth know what to anticipate, as well as giving him an opportunity to express his worries and fears.

Eventually, he connected with many aunts, as well as other relatives, many of whom he is continuing to develop as permanent relationships in his life.

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**Opening Up to Possibilities:** A young man who was part of one of the county teams began the Collaborative as quiet and reserved, even among his own team members. As their team dynamic grew, he became close to two members in particular. Because he had been placed out of his own county in group care for so long, he had lost contact with most people from his home county.

Over the course of the Collaborative, these two team members became core supports to the young man in his life and they learned more about him, his background, and family members he recalled from his past. Within the natural development of their relationship, they used appreciative inquiry-type questions to draw the youth out and were always attentive to his tendency to become a bit withdrawn when uncomfortable. The young man eventually
invited to attend meetings, these meetings are rarely focused on the youth's strengths, nor are they held in ways that are inviting for youth. Moreover, youth are often peripheral to the discussions and decision making, as the group of “professionals” around the table is often perceived as best equipped to make the necessary decisions.

The work done by teams in this area reflected the shift that teams experienced as they moved down the youth-centered continuum from “youth engagement” to “youth-adult partnerships” to “youth leadership.” The teams realized that they first needed to make sure everyone was aware of, understood, and valued youths’ rights. They then needed to do everything possible to ensure that youth were able to attend meetings. Next, they needed to make sure that youth were well prepared for meetings. All of this was needed to make sure that youth could take charge of and feel a sense of ownership over these meetings, allowing them to partner in making the decisions that affected their own lives.

a. **You’ve Got Rights!** *(Promoting Youths’ Rights)* — Youth in foster care often feel as if they have little control and no rights. It is critical for youth in foster care to be aware of and understand the rights they do have to ensure that they are able to advocate for themselves. Moreover, they need to know how to exercise these rights through self-advocacy. Teams worked with youth to develop materials about youths’ rights; distributed these materials to youth in a variety of ways, including through youth peer mentors; provided information about rights in a variety of formats (verbal and written) and through a variety of messengers (staff, caregivers, peer mentors, adult allies); and provided safe and supported peer opportunities for youth to receive information about their rights and self-advocacy skills as well as to practice these skills.

b. **Partnering with Youth** *(Making Meetings More Youth-Engaged and Youth-Centered)* — There are many meetings that are held with and about youth in foster care. Many of these meetings include agency staff and other paid professionals and providers. They are typically held in agency offices and often rely heavily on agency
regulations and policies as guides. As a result, youth often feel isolated at these meetings as they experience the meetings as events that are focused more on agency staff than on their lives. Finding ways to make these meetings more youth-engaged and youth-centered helps youth feel like real participants in these meetings and in charge of planning and making decisions about their lives and futures. To do this, teams changed the names of meetings to make them meaningful for youth; ensured that meetings were held at times and in locations that were accessible for youth; partnered with youth to identify meeting goals, participants, roles, and agendas; and encouraged and supported youth in opening the meeting and setting the tone.

c. **Youth Voice (Empowering Youth to Express Their Hopes, Dreams, & Needs)** — Youth know best what they want and need in life, but they are not always asked or given opportunities to express those wants and needs. Creating and providing opportunities for youth to express their strengths, goals, hopes, dreams, and challenges helps individual youth get what they need to live, love, learn, work, and thrive, both in informing their individual cases as well as in improving the system for other youth. Teams used a variety of tools, including Permanency Pacts, relationship webs, educational assessments, and career development tools to ensure that these conversations were part of ongoing processes rather than isolated events; they ensured tools were youth-friendly and accessible by asking youth for feedback and then using that feedback; and they held special events to ask specifically for youth feedback on system, process, and practice improvements.

d. **Youth Make the Call (Youth Interviewing and Selecting Caseworkers)** — Youth in foster care are surrounded by staff, caregivers, and paid professionals who tend to make most of the decisions about their lives. This results in youth often feeling helpless and powerless in ways that neither support positive youth development nor help them position themselves to achieve their own goals, hopes, and dreams. By giving them the opportunity to interview and select the staff with whom they will work most closely, they regain a sense of control in their lives, which is an essential part of youth development. Youth on teams developed questions and prompts to use in interviewing; conducted interviews with an understanding of appreciative inquiry; and worked with agency staff to develop protocols and clear expectations about this practice.

e. **Youth Take Charge (Youth Taking Charge of Planning and Meetings)** — In all of the meetings that are held to plan, discuss, and make decisions about youths’ lives, the shift for counties from a model of youth engagement (youth being present) to youth leadership was a practice-level shift that reflected the movement toward authentic ILP transformation. Youth needed to: be present; be prepared through verbal and written information delivered by staff, caregivers, peer mentors, and adult allies; play key roles in creating the agendas; identify supports and allies to attend meetings, using relationship webs and other tools that focused on circles of support; and have strong voices in the decisions that were made through self-advocacy training. But they also needed to have the opportunity to take leadership roles at these meetings by serving as co-facilitators and respected decision makers. This opportunity further helps them regain a sense of control about the planning and decisions that are being made related to their lives and futures.
These practices all reflect the shifts that are needed in order to help youth feel and be in charge of the planning and decisions related to their own lives. Most importantly, these practices demonstrate the need for tools, skills, and supports to help youth assume these roles most effectively.

**OUTCOME 3: Empower Youth to Get All They Need to Live, Love, Learn, and Work: PRACTICES**

“Traditional” ILP, prior to transformation efforts, provided youth with skill development in the areas of education and employment, largely through classroom-based teaching methods. Through conversations with the youth themselves, as well as with caregivers, partners, and the adults providing these services, it became clear that youth who are not in placement do not learn or obtain these skills through classes. Instead, they learn these skills in their families and communities, through their everyday relationships, experiences, and connections. Most youth do not learn how to cook by taking a cooking class; they learn by being in the kitchen with a parent or grandparent. They do not learn how to go to work by listening to a lecture about it; they learn by watching their family members get dressed, leave at a certain time each day, meeting their parents’ colleagues, or going to their workplaces. They do not learn how to have relationships by reading “tips sheets”; they learn by having various relationships and receiving support as they navigate through the complexities of them.

The work done by teams in this area reflects the shift from standard one-size-fits-all didactic classroom-based teaching to a more fluid, dynamic, individualized, and multi-pronged approach that includes caregivers, peers, community members, and others as both formal and informal teachers. This move, as a complement to the foundation laid by a renewed, broadened, and intentional focus on “love and belonging—permanency for a lifetime,” is the next step required for the transformation of ILP.
a. **Ordinary Places** (*Meeting Youth in Places that Are Comfortable*) — Youth are sometimes unable to attend meetings or access programs, services, and supports because the locations do not feel youth-friendly. Youth may feel uncomfortable going to county office buildings, which they associate with negative events, and, as a result, often miss the opportunity to have a say in their plans, share their goals, connect with others, develop relationships, and understand all that may be available to them. Many teams experimented with the practice of conducting meetings in places that youth feel are comfortable and ensuring that programs, services, and supports are offered in youth-friendly places. Youth were asked about places they felt to be comfortable and, whenever possible, that’s where meetings and activities were held, including community organizations, schools, and at their homes.

b. **Being There Every Day** (*Caregivers as Teachers and Guides*) — The relationship between caregivers and the youth in their care is a distinct one. They live in a familial setting, where most daily life skills are learned and practiced. In order to support youth in learning and practicing skills in their daily lives, caregiver involvement is essential. Even when skills are taught in a classroom setting, caregivers remain the best teachers, supporters, and guides for the youth. While this might seem obvious, caregivers don’t always receive the support or training needed to work with youth on these skills. Teams tested ways to provide orientation and training to caregivers; to develop toolkits (e.g., laundry supplies, shopping lists, recipes and cooking supplies, etc.); and to encourage caregivers to expose youth in their care to their own places of employment. This practice reinforced for counties the need to make it an explicit expectation that caregivers should be provided with resources and support in order to teach and support life skills practice. Often times, it was assumed that caregivers would be doing this, but caregivers similarly assumed that this was being taken care of by the life skills classes. Having open communication about who is doing what is critical in all aspects of the relationship between caregivers and staff.

c. **No Matter Where You Live** (*Providing Planning Meetings for Youth Who Don’t Normally Get Them*) — Emancipation Conferences are meetings held prior to youth aging out of care. They are often conducted for youth who are in foster care when they are living in the county of origin. But youth who either are not in foster care (e.g., involved with probation) or are placed out of county still need support as they prepare for adulthood. Conducting Emancipation Conferences for youth placed out of county and for probation youth offer these youth the necessary supports and can deepen their connections in the county in which they are living.

d. **Someone to Count On** (*Having an Adult Ally to Support Youth*) — For any young person, attending a meeting filled with adults and paid professionals can be intimidating. For youth in care, this is compounded by the fact that many of these adults have their own agendas, often speak in professional jargon, and may not even be known to the youth. Having an ally who can support the youth, advocate for the youth’s best interests, and follow up allows the meeting to be youth-centered. Additionally, when the adult ally is someone the youth trusts, it allows the youth to be more comfortable and engaged and to get what they need.
This practice became so powerful that not only did many counties implement variations of it, but the youth Collaborative faculty also developed a guide to describe the roles, responsibilities, and expectations for the youth as well as the adult ally.

e. **What Happens Next? (Following Up after Planning and Team Meetings)**—Counties are striving to ensure that youth and their adult supporters attend the meetings that are held to discuss and plan for youth’s success. At the conclusion of these meetings, many activities, assignments, and goals are typically developed for the youth and others. Following up on these activities, assignments, and goals to ensure they are completed is essential. Having someone connect with the youth and the multiple people involved helps keep each person on track with their responsibilities and holds everyone accountable.

Additionally, these meetings may raise some challenging emotional issues for youth that require different types of follow up and support. This support is equally critical to keeping plans on track. Following up with the goals set at the meeting, ensuring that youth have the supports needed to achieve these goals, and tracking progress on the tasks set during meetings are important ways to make sure that youth have what they need to live, love, learn, and work.

f. **Friend to Friend (Providing Peer Support for Youth in Foster Care)**—Similar to all teens and young adults, one of the most significant influences is a peer group. Thus, in addition to support that is provided by paid professionals and caregivers, youth in foster care often find significant support through their relationships with other youth in similar situations. The connections they can make through these shared experiences are distinctly different from those with adults. This outreach and support can be provided one-on-one in the form of mentors or in group settings through support groups or more open-ended mixers.

g. **Putting It All Together (Integrating Life Skills into Permanency-Focused Meetings)**—Permanency-focused meetings are meetings that are centered nearly exclusively on permanency. They are critically important for all youth in foster care as they allow for a concentrated focus on the attainment of “love and belonging—permanency for a lifetime.”

Rather than separating out the concept of “permanency” in a special exclusive permanency team meeting, these meetings present an opportunity to integrate many aspects of youths’ lives, including the achievement of their educational goals, their employment goals, and the attainment of the skills they need to live as adults. By bringing a discussion of these life skills into existing permanency meetings, youth can truly focus on getting what they need in ways that make sense for them.

h. **Making Sense of It All (Giving Youth the Information They Need in a Way that Makes Sense)**—Youth are unable to participate in meetings or access programs, services, and supports for a variety of reasons. One of the key reasons is that they often do not have the information they need to be able to do so. Although information may be given to them, it might be intimidating to youth, not understandable, or not identified as relevant.

Receiving the information that is necessary requires more than simply providing agency documents to youth. The information must be presented in ways that
are meaningful, clear, and useful to youth. Only when armed with this information can youth feel well-equipped to participate.

i. **Call, Text, and Friend Me (Using Technology to Engage Youth in Conversations)**—Youth must be included as partners in all discussions, planning, and decisions about their lives. They can only be partners if the communication happens in ways that are comfortable, continuous, and accessible to them. Multiple communications that use a variety of technology (e.g., texting, Facebook, etc.) invite youth into conversations in ways that feel right to them. Youth must be treated as individuals in order to identify the communication methods that are most comfortable, and expectations and boundaries around the use of these technologies must be clear to both youth and staff. Additionally, there are many online resources, such as California’s Career Zone, that can be used together with youth to help them identify goals, dreams, and pathways to achieving those goals.

Each of the strategies above, as tested by teams, reflected creative and different ways of making sure that youth learn—and get—what they need in order to be successful in life. They reflect a shift away from classroom-based skill-building or education, and a shift toward a more normalized, individualized, and respectful way of working with youth in care.

**Conclusion**

In working to transform ILP systems from the current system of services, which is designed to prepare youth to live on their own, into a system that holds onto youth, supports youth, and does everything it can to make sure that no youth ever has to live on his or her own, there is no single magic bullet either on the practice or system level. Instead, beliefs and practices must be grounded in the three principles identified by youth themselves:

1. Love and belonging—permanency for a lifetime;
2. Youth get what they need to live, love, learn, and work; and
3. Youth are in charge of planning and making decisions about their lives and futures.

Teams in this Collaborative tested a variety of practices on the journey toward a transformed system for older youth. While none has yet completed this journey, the practices detailed above provide a solid road map for how to begin within a foundation of youth-centered work.

**Acknowledgements**

*The authors would like to express their deepest appreciation to the Collaborative faculty, leadership team, project staff, and the nine participating county teams. This project would not have been possible without their dedication, commitment, and willingness to change the status quo. Most of all, the authors would like to thank the youth leaders and caregivers who pushed, shaped, focused, and defined the core of this work. They provided expertise and inspiration throughout the project and will continue to do so as this work develops.*

**References**


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Integrating Child Welfare and Mental Health Practices: Actualizing Youth Permanency Using the 3-5-7 Model

Darla L. Henry and Gregory Manning

Darla L. Henry, Ph.D., M.S.W., has been a social worker for almost 40 years. Her primary field of practice throughout these years has been child welfare, specializing in placement issues for children and youth in care. Dr. Henry developed the 3-5-7 Model in response to the need for a pragmatic, doable practice approach to help children and youth conduct the work of grieving losses and rebuilding relationships. She has trained and consulted on this program throughout the United States. Dr. Henry’s Ph.D. work was in resilience in maltreated children. She is published on this topic and on special needs adoption.

Gregory Manning, Psy.D., holds a doctorate in clinical psychology from the California School of Professional Psychology and is a licensed psychologist in California. He provides professional training and consultation in child welfare, mental health, and workplace issues to public and private agencies. He has presented at national, state, and local mental health and child welfare conferences. He is a graduate and undergraduate faculty member at several universities. Dr. Manning has extensive experience working in government and nonprofit community mental health agencies and is a member of the board of directors for Youth In Mind, a California-based nonprofit mental health advocacy group.

Overview

Most youth living in out-of-home care within the child welfare system have experienced traumatic events and confused feelings associated with their life experiences, and, frequently, they experience an array of emotional and behavioral responses to those hurtful events. At the core of these behaviors is the trauma of loss: primary losses of living in abusive, neglectful familial relationships that challenge normal developmental opportunities; and secondary losses that result from living with multiple caregivers in uncertainty, strangeness, and without feelings of security and safety in relationships (Pecora, White, Jackson, & Wiggins, 2009). Often, these youth have limited information about family history and events, and even where and how their family members are doing, after their removal from their families. These experiences and limited information challenge a youth’s ability to adjust to the changes brought about by an out-of-home placement (regardless of the reason), and an ability to trust that adults will be there for protection, support, and guidance.

How do we ensure that youth who have been traumatized by life experiences are ready for permanency, as they navigate the uncertainty of where and with whom they will be engaging in relationships? How do we support their actualization of lifelong relationships? How do we reduce the number of youth with mental health diagnoses related to multiple out-of-home placements? This article will discuss a relational practice methodology, the 3-5-7 Model, which is a promising practice and core approach that supports permanency work with older youth. Various permanency types, including the absence of permanency, mental health symptoms unique to foster youth, and relationship barriers, will be identified. Programs implementing the model will be highlighted, including those pursuing family finding and engagement, and youth and family team meetings. Finally, limitations and
Defining Permanency

Establishing permanency with youth who receive child welfare services due to family and caregiving disruptions has been an ongoing challenge for many years. What is permanency, and how do we define it as a basis for the work being done to minimize the trauma that youth may have experienced?

The California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP, 2007) has defined permanency from the youth’s perspective as being represented by a permanent connection with at least one committed adult who provides a safe, stable, and secure parenting relationship; love, unconditional commitment, and lifelong support; and a legal relationship, if possible.

Frey, Greenblatt, and Brown (2005) highlight four interrelated dimensions of permanence: physical, emotional, legal, and cultural, with many overlapping aspects. Youth can experience permanence in many different ways, including living in a physically and psychologically safe and stable family environment. They can also experience permanence by having a sense of belonging and feeling safe and secure with their primary attachments—family and other significant relationships that offer trust, safety, and reciprocity. Another way that youth can experience permanence is by gaining the rights and benefits of full family membership through a safe, emotionally secure, legal family status derived through reunification, guardianship, or adoption. Finally, permanence can be experienced when the youth is aware of and connected with his or her culture of origin, family traditions, racial and ethnic heritage, languages, and religion, regardless of the permanent family connection being realized.

Mental Health and the Absence of Permanency: Grief Responses

For older youth in foster care, the absence of permanency can have particularly profound
short- and long-term consequences. These consequences can be manifested by emotional, cognitive, and behavioral symptoms that can produce significant impairments in the youth's social, emotional, and behavioral functioning across nearly all life domains (Cooper, Banghart, & Aratani, 2010; Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008; Freundlich, Avery, Munson, & Gerstenzang, 2006; Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005; Niss, 1992). As noted in Table 1, there is a wide range of possible symptoms attributable, at least in part, to unresolved grief due to ambiguous losses experienced by the youth in foster care (Cohen & Mannarino, 2004; Henry, 2005; Pecora et al., 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional</th>
<th>Cognitive</th>
<th>Behavioral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>Hopeless/Helpless</td>
<td>Oppositional/Defiant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety/Shock</td>
<td>Suicidal ideation</td>
<td>Verbal/Behavioral aggression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger/Rage</td>
<td>Homicidal ideation</td>
<td>Not telling the truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional tantrums</td>
<td>Obsessive thoughts</td>
<td>Social withdrawal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypersensitive</td>
<td>Loss of touch with reality</td>
<td>Disturbed eating cycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over-reactive</td>
<td>Disbelief</td>
<td>Disturbed sleep cycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numbness</td>
<td>Confusion</td>
<td>Substance abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irritability</td>
<td>Guilt/Self-blame</td>
<td>Somatic complaints</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Symptoms Associated with Separation, Grief, and Loss for Youth in Foster Care

If these symptoms are viewed through the lens of unresolved grief and loss issues (Boss, 2006; Henry, 2005; Park, Mandell, & Lyons, 2009), an analogy could be drawn between these symptoms and those that might be commonly seen at a funeral (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Worden, 2008). If anyone at a funeral were to display any of the symptoms noted above, the symptoms would be accepted by others as normal reactions to the loss of the person who had died. It is this same degree of acceptance and compassion that must be considered with youth in foster care because these placements result in often unexplained separations from families, neighborhoods, and communities that still exist, leaving children and youth with a sense of ambiguous loss and, thus, unresolved grief associated with the loss and change.

The youth's emotional and relational functioning is negatively impacted by the absence of security in a family. Disruptions or ending of relationships, along with the limited opportunity to form permanent lifelong relationships, may lead to challenges in achieving emotional stability (Park et al., 2009). Many youth in foster care often struggle with having no one legally committed to them due to the termination or relinquishment of parental rights, dissolving of legal guardianship, or an adoption. Some foster youth who are dealing with the absence of enduring family relationships may begin to lose their connections with many elements of their cultural identities, as well as connection with their communities (Frey et al., 2005).

Grief is a universal human feeling and process (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Worden, 2008), since everyone ultimately experiences it. Typical sources of grief include death of loved ones, ending of relationships, loss of employment, the experience of a traumatic life event, and loss of physical or mental health. Emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions to losses depend on
a number of factors. These factors include life experience with past grief and loss situations, and current levels of social, emotional, and behavioral functioning, as well as sources of support (Worden, 2008).

**Grief and Loss Unique to Youth in Foster Care**

Youth in foster care experience these same sources of grief related to their placement experiences; however, they also experience sources of loss unique to being separated from family that still exists and then living in the foster care system with strangers or relative caregivers. For some youth in foster care, their layers of loss may complicate their grief process (Cooper et al., 2010; Henry, 2005).

Sources of unresolved grief unique to youth in foster care can include:

- Previous child abuse and neglect
- Ambiguous loss of parents, siblings, and other family members
  - Removal from family, community, and culture
  - Unexplained separation from parents, siblings, and/or culture
- Placement with strangers
- Changes in placement, roommates, school, and/or friends
- Uncertainty about what will happen next in their lives
- Uncertainty about whether youth will ever go home or will ever see their families again

Boss (2006) contrasts traditional loss with ambiguous loss, which is a loss in which there is no verification of death or any certainty that the youth will return to his or her pre-loss state of functioning. Because of this dynamic, the individual’s grief and loss process is halted, closure is prevented, and, ultimately, he or she may experience impairment in functioning across many or all life domains (Lee & Whiting, 2007). For some youth in foster care, this experience can occur when the parents are not able to reunify with the child who has previously been removed from their care. Often the challenge for these youth in foster care, as it relates to the grief and loss process, is that the parent continues to be present in the mind of the youth, although the youth no longer has the chance to experience the parent’s physical presence.

The distinction between more traditional, clear-cut loss and ambiguous loss is important for child welfare and mental health professionals to consider because the lack of clarity about what happened, why, and whether birth parents and family members will continue to be part of youths’ lives often elicits confusion, rather than resolution of feelings of grief and loss. It is this confusion that brings about the social, emotional, and cognitive challenges often experienced by youth in foster care who are struggling to understand what happened to them, and why they don’t have enduring and lifelong family relationships. Too often, these youth are misdiagnosed or prescribed inappropriate medication because these ambiguous losses, and the corresponding unresolved grief, are not inherently linked to emotional and behavioral reactions.

For some youth, living with immediate or extended family members, even if in a potentially abusive or neglectful relationship, can yield a sense of belonging. An ambiguous loss—even when the loss is of a family environment of dubious safety—is particularly difficult because the people considered to be lost were supposed to love, protect, and keep the youth safe, yet failed to do so. Loss of this family through out-of-home placement, even if it means acquiring increased physical safety or that basic needs will now be met, can be experienced by the youth as a significant loss of connection and security (Cooper et al., 2010). Once the youth is in foster care, additional potential sources of loss include separation from classmates, neighbors, and activities that used to be familiar for the youth.
While research has shown that many maltreated youth show resilience in the face of the adversity of child abuse and neglect, others struggle with mental health problems, risk-taking behaviors, social disadvantages, and physical health problems (Metzger, 2008). Caution is warranted in drawing conclusions because of methodological limitations. Metzger (2008) notes that the development of feelings of being valued promotes resilient abilities in the face of stress. Youth who successfully establish their own value through their ability to overcome negative thoughts about themselves have a protective factor for resilience. By showing “toughness,” they reinforce strengths within themselves and enhance their self-value (Henry, 1999). On the other hand, many youth are placed in mental health treatment based on the assumption that they have an emotional or behavioral disorder. However, not all youth in care have or need treatment. This underscores the need to utilize careful screening and assessment methods for youth entering and remaining in foster care (Pecora et al., 2009).

**Relationship Barriers to Permanency for Youth in Foster Care**

When working to achieve permanency for youth in foster care, barriers (Niss, 1992) can often develop that complicate and slow down this journey toward permanency:

- Conflicted, violent, volatile, and otherwise abusive relationship history
- Fear or avoidance of entering into unconditional and loving relationships
- Absence of guaranteed, yet conditional, system-based supports once the youth exits foster care

Without having accurate information about the youths’ birth family relationships, and opportunities to grieve both traditional and ambiguous losses associated with them, youth exiting foster care and facing these barriers may experience increased social, emotional, and behavioral struggles.

As long as they lack the opportunities to grieve and resolve their losses, foster youth will likely struggle with these barriers to achieving permanency well into their adult years. Engaging youth, using the concepts and activities of the 3-5-7 Model, addresses the issues related to the absence of a secure family relationship and guides youth toward actualizing permanency by supporting them through a clarification of the events of their lives as they safely express their feelings of grief. The integration of all current and previous relationships help youth determine which adults can offer safe and secure permanent family relationships.

**The 3-5-7 Model**

The 3-5-7 Model consists of three (3) tasks, five (5) conceptual questions, and seven (7) interpersonal skill elements that guide activities and exercises toward assisting youth in their permanency work. The 3 tasks of clarification, integration, and actualization (Donley-Zeigler, 1996) frame the work of youth in exploring life events, separation and loss experiences, caring and hurtful relationships, and potential paths to permanent connections. The 5 conceptual questions support the work of the 3 tasks to address the issues of identity (Erikson, 1963; Van Gulden & Bartels-Rabb, 1995), loss (Rando, 1993; Jewett, 1978; Trozzi, 1999), attachment (Fahlberg, 1991), relationship building (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990), and safety and belongingness (Henry, 1999). The 7 interpersonal elements and social work/therapist/caregiver abilities, including the attitudes and beliefs of those assisting in this work, are vital to providing the foundation for the work of the 3 tasks and 5 questions (Henry, 2005).
The concepts of the 3-5-7 Model can be implemented by all individuals who support youth who present grief behaviors. The principles of the model are particularly applicable for individuals who live with youth and/or meet with them on a regular basis. More specifically, skill workers can provide continuity of the grief work and relationship-building process by using the 3 tasks to explore the issues of the 5 questions. Successful workers, therapists, and families demonstrate the 7 skill elements.

This graphic provides a visual overview of the 3-5-7 Model.

### The 3 Tasks

#### Clarification

Clarification activities engage youth in exploring their life events, giving meaning to their emerging identities and helping them to reconcile the realities of their many separations, relationship disruptions, and losses. Through words and actions, youth express the need for clarification: “Why can’t I live with my mom?” or “I don’t know why I was taken away.” These questions, or similar inquiries, must evoke the attention of families and workers and prompt them to engage the youth in a clarifying activity and/or discussion. Clarification provides a factual base to understand and to distinguish between what is real and what is unreal for the youth. As they learn more and remember more about their past experiences, youth are supported to safely express painful feelings, love, anger and hatred for others, fears, mistrust, and despair, as well as to more overtly experience a grieving process. When done in the presence of a listening person, on a consistent basis, the youth perceives safety and...
eventually feels trust within that relationship. By remaining present to their grief, youth experience comforting responses to their need for security; the attachment cycle process has continuity and the relationship is strengthened (Fahlberg, 1991). This reflection on life events and exploration of the impact of these life events clarifies both the struggles in establishing identity and how these experiences have influenced their thinking about who they are (Donley-Zeigler, 1996; Fahlberg, 1991; Henry, 2010).

Integration

Integration activities are intertwined with ongoing clarification activities; significant people and roles are added into the youth’s discussions and activities. Integration is based on a process of reviewing all past and present relationships so that youth have the opportunity to determine which relationships are and will be safely supportive of them, while also expressing feelings and thoughts of grief surrounding loss experiences within these relationships. They express statements such as, “I didn’t like those people,” or “I really miss my last foster mom.” These expressions provide an opportunity for youth to be acknowledged, valued, and cared for in recognition of people who have been available when they needed support. It is this work that provides foundations for building permanent connections. Integration activities highlight, for the youth, the work that may need to be done to build and strengthen selected relationships, to resolve hurtful relationships, or to let go of those who will not be a part of their lives.

During integration work, youth come to accept that they do not have to choose membership in one particular family. If the youth are not expected to reunite with their biological families, they begin to deal with issues of loyalty toward biological parents and toward biological family members, loyalty issues that could inhibit the formation of succeeding permanent and lifelong relationships (Henry, 2005). Yet if reunification is planned with nuclear or extended family, integration activities provide opportunities for youth and family to discuss and explore the relationships the youth has experienced while living in substitute care. This is an integral activity in family preparation and family engagement work (Henry, 2010).

Taking part in both clarifying and integrative activities help youth to better understand their complex histories and convey the message that their questions will be honored and that their stories will be listened to as they are supported to identify and express many confusing feelings and anxieties. This work enables youth to adopt a position of actualization when planning for their futures.

Actualization

The third task, actualization, is the visualization of permanency; that is, the sense of feeling safe and belonging; claiming an identity; and establishing a place within family or other permanent relationship. Actualization is the ability of the youth to begin to see a possible permanent future with a family, parent, or guardian as the tasks of clarification and integration are occurring and evolving. When life events are better understood, when losses have been recognized and are being grieved, when attachments and relationships are identified and continue to be explored, and when identity is more secure, youth gain confidence to see the future in relation to reciprocal connections. There is hope for safely becoming a member of a family—whether it is biological, foster, adoptive, kinship, or guardianship—when there is a sense that the potential exists for sharing a common future together. Statements and phrases such as, “I feel like one of the family,” or “my mom, my dad, my sister,” indicate that actualization is occurring. For many youth, actualization may be present with several families, similar to extended family relationships inherent in all family structures. In participating in clarification and integration activities, youth who working through the task of actualization make choices based on
relational permanency, which may or may not include legal permanency.

The 5 Conceptual Questions

The 5 conceptual questions guide youths’ explorations of the issues of identity, loss, attachment, relationships, and security that have challenged their experiences and which have thrown them off of their developmental courses and unbalanced the stability needed for their growth (Henry, 2005). The 5 conceptual questions are woven into the activities of the 3 tasks:

1. **Who am I?** *Identity* is formulated through ongoing clarification of life experiences in relation to history, culture, and developmental influences.

2. **What happened to me?** *Loss and grief issues* are recognized and supported through clarification of events that have led to the youth not being able to live with biological parents and/or living in out-of-home placements. These might include separations and abuse events.

3. **Where am I going?** *Attachments* with past and current relationships are integrated by youth through their explorations of the meaning of those relationships, taking past and current experiences into consideration. They begin to make decisions about those with whom they want to maintain relationships and about those with whom they do not, even if contact may be limited by safety concerns. These decisions may change through developmental growth.

4. **How will I get there?** Repetition of the attachment cycle (Fahlberg, 1991), with needs being met on a consistent basis within a stable environment, encourages *relationship building*; that is, the stability and well-being that is desired in permanency connections. Understanding the attachment cycle and the interruptions to needs being met is the work of helping youth grieve through the attachment process. Youth grieve and reconcile losses in the context of a consistent relationship (Wolfelt, 1996). As the attachment process is repeated on a continuous cycle, youth build relationships through the establishment of trust and perceptions of security and safety. During this process, youth move into the actualization phase.

5. **When will I know I belong?** Repeated interactions of reciprocal attachments, with elements of stability, continuity, and mutuality, ensure that youth and families are building more permanent relationships (Hess, 1982). When a youth feels *safe* in a relationship and families have claimed the youth as a family member, the youth eventually feels belonging within the family. For many youth, this is and will be an ongoing, lifelong process requiring steady attention and conscious effort (Henry, 2005).

While not directly asking these conceptual questions, youth who have experienced the traumas of primary loss (the result of abuse, neglect, and/or domestic/community violence) and secondary loss (alternate care placements) are wondering about or are concerned about their survival, no matter where or with whom they are living. Having experienced environments that feel unsafe to them, whether in biological homes or multiple placement homes, they search for a sense of *safety* (Henry, 2005). Their behaviors, comments, and questions are viewed as prompts to address issues of identity confusion, separation and loss feelings, attachment difficulties, and uncertainties about relationships. Responding to these behaviors and questions provides a guide to support their ongoing grief and relationship-building work.

The 7 Interpersonal Elements

7 interpersonal elements are identified as several of the many skills and values that are needed for those who support the work of
youth and families in grieving and relationship building. Critical skills are the ability to:

- **engage** youth and families in activities that explore their lives
- **recognize** that painful feelings are expressed in the behaviors of those who have been traumatized
- **listen** and to be present to the expression of all feelings
- **affirm** the pain and hurts from these experiences
- **be present** in order to provide the opportunity for youth to do the work of grieving their emotions and processing their losses
- **offer a safe space** where the youth is comfortable expressing these feelings
- **respond briefly** when expressing acknowledgement and assurance to youth in order to maintain space in the youth’s grieving process and establish trust

Engaging youth to do the work of grieving and relationship building, using the 3-5-7 Model, requires continuity and stability of caseworker and caregiver support services. The level of trust between youth and worker during activities, and the overall intensity and duration of the relationship, suggests that the process demands and supplies both emotional and concrete support for youth (Osterling & Hines, 2006). As youth begin to reconcile their grief, they may more readily enter into deeper, intensive therapies, if needed, through mental health programs, in order to explore the impact that abusive and damaging relationships may have had on them. These 7 skill elements guide the efforts of professionals, counselors, and families as they are present to and support the grief work of the youth.

In closing this description of the elements of the 3-5-7 model, it is worth noting that the individuals in roles of support should be aware of their own grief processes so that their ongoing grief work will not become barriers to the expressions of feelings and behaviors of the youth who are working through their grief (Henry, 2010). There is no need to be an expert in grieving, but merely to be companions who witness the expressions of others who are experiencing loss, companions who validate and allow the process of grieving to occur (Wolfelt, 1996).

**Applications of the 3-5-7 Model**

The 3-5-7 Model has been implemented in a variety of settings, using both formal and informal organizational and program structures. Similar core practices, however, are common to all applications. These are:

1. **Continuity**: Critical to supporting the grief process and relationship building is the consistency of time. Youth should be seen every other week at a minimum, with phone contact in the interim. This establishes continuity for the work being done and provides a relationship of safety for ongoing expressions of grief.

2. **Use of Activities and Exercises**: The use of activities and exercises is critical to engaging youth in their grief and loss work. Those supporting the work of youth should be knowledgeable of and have resources for a variety of activities that encourage and support the work of clarification, integration, and actualization to explore the issues of identity, loss, attachment, and relationship building. Examples of effective activities, although there are many, include: life/loss lines, life maps, collages/puzzles, safety nets, and sand art (Henry, 2005; Jewitt Jarratt, 1982; Keck & Kupecky, 1995; Worden, 1996). Life books provide an excellent tool for continuity of the grief process. They provide a tangible and concrete account for the youth of the clarification work that they are doing, as well as a means of reflection between sessions and evidence of the
activities of clarification, integration, and actualization.

3. **Knowledge and communication skills:** Those working with youth in a caseworker role must be knowledgeable about abuse and neglect, grief and loss behaviors, adolescent development, and the dynamics of biological and placement families. Effective communication abilities for working within the teams of caseworkers, therapists, and parents who are working with each youth are needed. It is critical that workers be comfortable with teens and secure in comforting the behaviors of grief.

4. **Leadership:** Programs that use the 3-5-7 Model have been initiated by one or several individuals who have championed the work, providing the model elements individually with youth through engagement activities or creating teams to provide services, whether it be in county public agencies or in private group settings. Whether through training, pilot projects, and/or administrative support, leadership has driven the process for implementation.

5. **Training and consultation:** Training on the concepts of the 3-5-7 Model and foundational social work skills has been provided in successful applications of the model. Consultation of cases and follow-up discussions of work with youth, including program and practice implementation strategies, has also been provided. Participants have included social workers and county caseworkers, mental health therapists, group care providers, biological and resource families, former foster and adopted youth, CASA volunteers, supervisors, administrators, and community advocates.

Implementing a program that focuses on the 3-5-7 Model can be achieved by professionals who commit to the continuity of time to focus on the 3 tasks and 5 questions of the model. Implementation can also be supported by resource families, residential caregivers, or CASA mentors. Organizations planning to implement the 3-5-7 model should provide initial training on the model to all staff who will be applying the concepts. Ongoing training ensures fidelity to the model, as well as provides the opportunity to discuss practice challenges and successes. Agency administrators and supervisors who understand the usefulness of the 3-5-7 Model can support staff in their practice of the model with youth by assuring sufficient time to provide the service.

**Program Implementation**

What the authors have found and observed regarding the implementation of the 3-5-7 Model, through practice experiences, provision of training and consultation, oversight of piloted projects, participation in surveys, and anecdotal feedback, has been an excitement about the practical usefulness of the model as an approach that supports the work of those grieving and experiencing trauma. While formal research has yet to be conducted on the 3-5-7 Model, it has become an informed practice that is being implemented in state and county agencies and in private organizations around the country.

The activities of the 3-5-7 Model are intended to be woven into ongoing child welfare practices with youth and families by public and private child welfare staff, resource families, residential care providers, and mental health practitioners. Caseworkers and social workers, child welfare supervisors and administrators, mental health providers, juvenile probation programs, and private practitioners, such as those providing family counseling, adolescent therapy, and play therapy, have responded positively to the use of this model as a permanency practice. Throughout California, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Delaware, and Wisconsin (in addition to other states), professionals and child care staff and parents report positive experiences to the authors in using the 3-5-7 Model. This diverse set of
people view the 3-5-7 Model as a doable approach to understanding the trauma-based and grief-related behaviors of youth and working with them to rebuild permanent relationships.

Table 2 summarizes the implementation of the 3-5-7 Model in the states listed above. Activities in California and Pennsylvania are then highlighted, as they are the focus of direct practices and program implementation by the authors. Dr. Henry has provided extensive training and consultation in both states, and Dr. Manning has provided training and consultation in California.

Table 2. State Implementation of the 3-5-7 Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATE</th>
<th>PROJECT</th>
<th>PROGRAM</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>Coordinated by California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP); 2007-2010.</td>
<td>Training and consultation on 3-5-7 Model concepts provided to 15 counties and private partner agencies to support the training of Kevin Campbell, Family Finding. Additional training and consultation provided to all 18 Los Angeles county offices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pilot project initiated by Los Angeles county to implement the 3-5-7 Model with WRAP providers.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pilot project initiated by Kern County to evaluate the usefulness of life books to support the work of the 3-5-7 Model.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>Administered by Pennsylvania Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network (SWAN) through the Department of Public Welfare/Office of Children Youth and Families; federal and state funding support SWAN activities; 2003-current.</td>
<td>Child Preparation services, based on 3-5-7 Model concepts, are provided by private provider agencies upon referrals by county children and youth agencies. Public agencies determine the criteria for the referral. Private agencies have six months, with a minimum of 10 face-to-face contacts with the child or youth, to complete the service for payment. Compliance and best practice oversight is provided by ongoing technical assistance from SWAN regional coordinators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Survey was conducted in 2005 to determine effectiveness of child preparation services using 3-5-7 Model concepts.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>Administered by New Hampshire Department of Children Youth and Families throughout all counties; 2005-current.</td>
<td>County and private agency social workers provide permanency-based services using 3-5-7 Model concepts throughout the state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>Department of Children, Youth, and Their Families supports statewide training to county and private provider agencies, their staff and resource families, on use of the 3-5-7 Model.</td>
<td>Participated in pilot project through AdoptUSKids using the 3-5-7 Model concepts to prepare youth to find families through the Internet. Project implementation was not completed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>ANU Family Services provides training to resource families using 3-5-7 Model concepts in training curriculum.</td>
<td>Working with state to shift practices toward grief and loss process before making family connections in permanency work. Planning integration of 3-5-7 Model into current practice without adding staff.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The California Experience: 3-5-7 Model and Youth Permanency

As a practice methodology, the 3-5-7 Model has been integral to the use of family finding and engagement activities within 15 California counties. Family finding and engagement is, at its core, a relationship-building program, not a placement program (CPYP, 2007; Campbell et al., 2005; Shirk, 2006). From the CPYP perspective, any effort that leads to the establishment of healthy, loving, and long-term connections with youth in foster care can be considered successful and critically important. Whether or not reunification or other legally permanent outcomes occur as a result of the integration of family finding and engagement practices, young people in this program have reported finding meaning in the process of connecting with important family relationships for a sense of what they describe as relational permanence or emotional security.

Three programs that have implemented the 3-5-7 Model are highlighted in Table 3.

Table 3. Implementation of the 3-5-7 Model in California

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTY</th>
<th>PROJECT</th>
<th>SUBJECTS</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>County/Mental Health Collaborative for Family Finding activities</td>
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Orange County Child Welfare and Mental Health Collaboration

An example of relational permanence is highlighted using the 3-5-7 Model in family finding and engagement activities. In Orange County, California, a collaborative approach among multiple public and private child welfare agencies served as the catalyst to implement the 3-5-7 Model (Manning, 2010). Dr. Manning served as program coordinator for implementation of the model with a team led by Richard, a 17-year-old youth in residential care who was preparing to exit the foster care system. An exhaustive family finding and engagement process was initiated to address Richard’s need for a permanent family connection to support the transition to adulthood. Richard’s reconnection process with his family lasted several months and included a number of flights to visit his relatives. Using the 3-5-7 Model, Richard’s therapist worked closely with him to guide his journey through the tasks of clarification and integration in order to process his wide range of feelings related to being in a family. The actualization task became reality for Richard through an extended period of intense nightly text messaging with his new primary caretaking relative.

Richard’s therapist continued to work with him on the 3 tasks using a Lossline—a visual representation of his history of losses and life
changes. (This Lossline represents an integral part of the therapeutic work with the youth, serving as the written road map of the youth’s life.) Concurrently, work began on the creation of his life book. Richard described the life book process as an “amazing and interesting experience” as he learned more about himself and his family. Richard described the biggest success related to the project as the realization in both his heart and his mind that he truly does have permanent “family” connections beyond his immediate biological family with whom he continues to have limited contact. A portion of this success can be attributed to Richard’s engagement and therapeutic work done using the 3-5-7 Model. In the end, Richard summarized, “everyone should know that they have family. . . more of this [3-5-7 Model and family finding and engagement work] should be done. I think it would change their [child welfare peers’] lives a whole lot. It is amazing.”

Los Angeles County Metro North Wraparound Pilot Project

In 2008, Los Angeles County, Metro North office, conducted a pilot project with seven Wraparound provider programs, each identifying a youth for a three-month implementation program to apply the concepts of the 3-5-7 Model. Monitored by the Department of Family Services and the Department of Mental Health, the participating county and mental health staff, along with all Wraparound teams who would be working with the youth, received a one-day training on the model by Dr. Henry. Training content included the concepts of the model and how to use identified activities, such as life books, life maps, loss history charts, and collages, to engage youth in clarification, integration, and actualization tasks to explore the issues of identity, loss, attachment, relationship building, and safety in relationships. Following the training, program staff reviewed a youth’s case and developed written plans, identifying roles for team members who would do activities with each youth to ensure continuity of time and application of the model concepts.

At the end of the project, six of the seven Wraparound programs (one youth did not complete the project) reported positive changes in the behaviors of the youth who had been engaged in the 3-5-7 Model program. Some of these behaviors included: less anger, more interest in working with staff, willingness to work with family members, and more interest in future planning. One Wraparound therapist showed an 11-page, computer developed, loss history chart that a 17-year-old youth had completed. The therapist used this activity to support the youth in clarification of the story of his life, identifying

Anecdotal Applications of the 3-5-7 Model

In Sonoma County, California, a supervisor used the concepts of the 3-5-7 Model to help a 12-year-old boy who was experiencing conflicting loyalties for his mother and for his prospective adoptive family. Although willing to be adopted by his foster family, he was not ready to consent to the finalization. He continued to have feelings and thoughts about “leaving his mother” and his concerns for her feelings about his adoption. This creative supervisor decided to allow for contact between the youth and his mother, even though parental rights had been terminated. After two visits, in which the young man was able to find answers to his questions, he was ready to commit to his new family, having actualized his belongingness (feelings of permanency) with them. Using the tasks of clarification and integration, the supervisor had engaged the youth in exploring his understanding of his relationship with his mother, expressing feelings of her loss, and then honoring her presence and ultimately her place in his life. He was able to actualize permanency with his adoptive family by integrating both family relationships in his future (Henry, 2010).
the losses within many of these events. The visual history chart helped him in the integration of these events with numerous people with whom he knew and had relationships. As he identified the positives and negatives of these relationships, actualization occurred as he visualized permanency in several of these relationships, desiring to establish more secure connections with them.

Throughout the work to incorporate the 3-5-7 Model into the Wraparound process, whether it was a case-carrying worker who was the person who supported the work or a clinically trained staff member, the result was the same. All reported value in having used the model and noted enhancement in the healing process for the youth with whom they were working. The youth reported that they were able to get in touch with how their experiences had impacted their lives. Having a witness present (worker/therapist), as they re-visited the past with the purpose of making sense of it in the moment, became a corrective emotional experience for them. In every situation, application of the concepts of the 3-5-7 Model was effective in helping the youth improve their daily functioning. Wraparound staff found that youth were better engaged, related positive thoughts about doing the work of exploring past relationships, more readily expressed feelings connected with their experiences of loss, and explored permanent relationships. Los Angeles Metro North has strongly requested that these Wraparound programs, which work with county youth placed in their group homes, use the 3-5-7 Model in their permanency connections activities (Viade, 2010).

**Kern County Life Book Pilot Project**

In Kern County, Children and Family Services, along with partner AspiraNet, a private foster family agency, conducted a one-year (2008) pilot project with 20 children and youth, ages 3 to 18, to determine the usefulness of life books as a tool in applying the concepts of the 3-5-7 Model. Applying the 7 skill elements throughout their engagement with youth, AspiraNet social workers approached the issues of the 5 conceptual questions of loss, identity, attachments, and secure relationships through the use of a life book with each youth. Life book activities supported the 3 tasks by providing opportunities for youth to clarify confusions of identity and expressions of feelings about losses as a result of their life events. Integration activities provided opportunities to explore past, current, and future relationships in relation to feelings of attachment and meaning. Throughout life book work, as youth were able to create a tangible, concrete product that reflected the work that they were doing, they were able to visualize more secure relationships, becoming more actualized toward permanent connections.

The results from a pre-test/post-test inventory showed overall improvement regarding depression and perceptions of youths’ relationships. Depression scores significantly declined for two participants, while three maintained stable emotional states. According to project staff, of the 13 children and youth who completed the project, placement disruptions and placement changes decreased in comparison with other county placements, with nine participants having no placement disruptions during the one-year study. Three children finalized adoptions and two vocalized, for the first time, their actualization to be adopted.

Social workers who participated in this project reported that they experienced:

- Youth gaining a more realistic picture of their lives;
- Youth expressing emotions to and about integral relationships; and
- Youth being empowered to make decisions about these relationships and the place of these relationships in their lives.
Social workers also observed that in applying the concepts of the 3-5-7 Model in the use of life books, youth,

through clarification activities, have a way to express their voices and thoughts about the past, and have a way to work through losses toward understanding who they are;

through integration activities, have a way to reflect on and give meaning to people in their lives so that they more realistically understand with whom they want to maintain relationships; and

through actualization activities, have a way to build on these relationships to secure permanent connections.

Workers reported that the life book process enabled youth to have concentrated time to focus on feelings work that was supported by listening and affirming their stories and perspectives. Overall, the use of the 3-5-7 Model in Kern County has led to more staff who are consistently using these concepts in their direct casework practices. The county now requires the life book process in all family finding activities (Esquivel, 2010).

With both of these pilot projects, and the Orange County collaboration, the approaches were similar. Essential to the engagement process was the continuity of contacts with youth, the use of tools (e.g., life book, loss history chart, life maps) to explore issues, and the support of an individual to listen to and affirm the feelings and stories of a youth's life experiences from their perspectives. Within the context of support for grieving work, youth were able to find answers in the safety of a trusting relationship to explore permanency connections. Time was focused on the youth's understanding of their stories, providing information and clarifying misinformation. Youth abilities to cope with and adapt to the confusions and uncertainties were recognized. With more secure knowledge of self and recognition of strengths, youth were empowered to engage in the building of relationships that had the potential for permanency.

The Pennsylvania Experience

In Pennsylvania, the 3-5-7 Model is used as a service of the Pennsylvania Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network (SWAN), which has incorporated the model as the core of child preparation services provided to the county child welfare agencies through private agency providers. Implemented since 2004, services are intended to prepare children and youth for all options for permanency. The preparation work may be provided in group and/or individual sessions. Each child or youth engaging in child

Anecdotal Applications of the 3-5-7 Model

Two stories of engaging youth for family reconnections, after family finding activities were conducted, came from Fresno and San Luis Obispo counties. In Fresno County, the worker connected a 16-year-old youth with previously unknown family in Virginia. After training and consultation on the 3-5-7 Model, the worker approached the youth's concerns and apprehensions in the context of his loss feelings and grief behaviors. The youth's ability to understand his feelings and actions in relation to grief behaviors enabled the worker to be present and respond to his reactions of anticipation and uncertainty. Her availability to him to process these feelings provided assurance and the opportunity to clarify his life events of the past so that he was able to conduct a conscious integration of potential new relationships with these current family connections, actualizing permanency in his family relationships (Henry, 2010). While not physically living with family in Virginia, he has achieved relational permanency, knowing that he experiences the security of being connected to family.
preparation activities is required to have a life book that reflects the tasks they have done in clarification, integration, and actualization that support their grief work and relationship-building processes. Since 2007, all youth with a goal of independent living have been required to receive this preparation service to assure that they have a permanent relationship connection when they leave care.

Although a limited survey was conducted with county and private agency workers one year into implementation of the service, no follow-up research has been done. The initial survey was conducted to determine if the program, as developed, was being effective in the work of engaging youth in preparation for permanency. Results revealed the overall effectiveness of preparation services and the use of the 3-5-7 Model, supporting the continuation of this work. Using Likert scaled questions, resulting in a mean score of 4.61/5.0, county and private agency worker responses noted the following:

- Caretakers developed empathy to assist youth in their care to deal with grief instead of reacting to behavior issues.
- Some youth were able to discuss and acknowledge the past, having received the message that it is okay to grieve.
- Improved self-identity was observed; life book activities helped boost self-esteem, increasing self awareness.
- Information led to increased understanding of youth stories and reasons for placements.
- For older youth in independent living situations, the model provided clarification of background and time in placement.
- Youth became more self-sufficient and empowered, having a better understanding of options for decision making in establishing permanent relationships.

Overall, child preparation services, using the core concepts of the 3-5-7 Model, are an established practice toward assuring that youth have opportunities to engage in activities that lead to permanency relationships.

Discussion and Practice Implications

The 3-5-7 Model provides another foundational practice for the development of programs that provide a supportive grieving and relationship-building network for youth who are experiencing family disruptions. Youth who have engaged in this work have been empowered to explore permanency in relationships from a place of resolution of past experiences and confidence for the future.

The beauty of the 3-5-7 Model is that it provides a methodology to help youth bring the past forward to identify and find lost family and significant adult relationships that have the potential to become permanency resources in the present and to support the youth in the future.

The model brings into practice a perspective that youth have the strengths to reconcile their past losses, including painful family separations, and to heal from these experiences doing the work of creating lasting connections with others. How will we build on their resiliencies and assets, in their desires to live “normal” lives?

Implementation of the 3-5-7 Model has been used from both formal and informal practice perspectives. Results have demonstrated that the model can be effectively applied in both private and public agency settings to achieve both permanence and family connections with youth who too often are considered to be unable to achieve permanence. States and county child welfare organizations have created agency structures within which to provide the services connected to the model. Private agency family service providers have incorporated the concepts of the model into permanency practices. Group
and residential providers have integrated model activities in core child care programs. Informally, the 3-5-7 Model has been incorporated into the practices by those who have attended trainings, enhancing their attention to the grief work of those youth with whom they do permanency work.

Questions continue as to implementation strategies with this population of youth and their families. What can be done by existing staffs to incorporate the 3-5-7 Model into current practice applications? An important rebuttal to the frequently raised concern about staffing capacity is that this work can be done with existing staff or staff dedicated to focused work using the 3-5-7 Model. Staff can also be assigned to focus specifically on youth who are receiving services in family finding and engagement activities.

Having been implemented in a variety of settings over the past six years, anecdotal accounts of the use of the 3-5-7 Model have indicated its importance as a viable practice approach to support the work of youth in establishing permanent relationships. Positive responses to the concepts of the 3-5-7 Model have been encouraging for the continuation of this work. Ongoing training and consultation is essential to support the efforts of a wide range of public and private organizations who have been implementing, and desire to implement, 3-5-7 Model programs.

Suggestions for Research

Outcomes reported have been anecdotal based on relational practice applications of the 3-5-7 Model. Results from across the country indicate the importance for research and evaluation of the application and effectiveness of the 3-5-7 Model. Questions for inquiry might include:

- Does actualization indicate capacity for permanency as youth engage in clarification and integration work?
- How is strength of permanency relationships determined as a result of 3-5-7 Model work?
- Can success for youth in “new” permanency families be predicted?
- How does continuity of service delivery impact the work of the 3-5-7 Model?
- Are suggested tools (life book, life map, loss line) for engagement and issues resolution effective?

Anecdotal Applications of the 3-5-7 Model

In San Luis Obispo County, a permanency specialist used the 3-5-7 Model to prepare a 14-year-old youth for reunification with his mother and sister who were living in Wyoming. Reunification with the mother was uncertain as a permanency resource for him since it had been three years since her son had lived with her and they had had limited contact over that time. The specialist and county worker had numerous discussions with the mother by phone to support her concerns, most specifically the grief feelings that she had experienced regarding the situation of her son not living with her. The sister was also included in these discussions regarding loss feelings for her brother. Engaging the youth in a variety of exercises and activities, the specialist guided his work in clarification of his life events, wherein he expressed various feelings related to the losses in his life, and the integration of his family living experiences, giving meaning to numerous relationships, so that he could actualize (envision) the possibility of living again with his mother and sister. Eventually, he made the trip to Wyoming, with a positive reunion outcome. Contact and visitation were continued for several months and reunification resulted when the youth expressed his readiness to return to live with his mother (Henry, 2010).
• How is the work impacted by the skills of those engaging youth?

• What are indicators of where youth are in their grief stages and attachment difficulties? What baseline would this provide to assess the work being done in these areas?

• What impacts do variables of age, gender, race/ethnicity, mental and physical ability, individual and/or group modalities have on the outcomes of 3-5-7 Model work?

• Are youth behaviors indicative of mental health diagnoses or of grief stages? How might a distinction between the two recommend interventions? What behaviors/attitudes might indicate resiliency factors?

• How does practice integration of the 3-5-7 Model impact the achievement and sustainment of permanency for youth while in foster care and after they exit foster care?

Likewise, as the 3-5-7 Model is applied to family finding and engagement work and to family group programs, it will be necessary to evaluate whether the model leads to secure permanency relationships for youth and their biological families. Longitudinal studies toward assuring youth permanency are encouraged to determine outcomes for application of the 3-5-7 Model.

Current anecdotal outcomes, in combination with stronger research data, will provide valuable information to this field of permanency practice. Significant research results will encourage funding for the implementation of the 3-5-7 Model in a broader context as a viable approach to child welfare practices.

References


Permanency for LGBTQ Youth

Gerald P. Mallon, D.S.W.

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Introduction

I lived in a group home for four years, no family to speak of, no visits . . . nothing . . . I was pretty much on my own. One day, my social worker got me this guy who they said was gonna be my mentor. I thought, “Oh, yeah, same crap as always, some volunteer to work with the troubled gay teen for a couple of weeks and then I’ll never see him again.” But I was wrong. Mark, my mentor, was a great guy. He became like family to me. In fact, after I left care when I turned 18, he was my biggest support. He is the person I could call at 2 a.m. or whenever I needed to talk with someone. He always remembers my birthday . . . I am at his house on Christmas . . . at Thanksgiving . . . he is my family.

This past year, he and I decided that we should make our relationship permanent and legal and so we decided to petition the court so that Mark could adopt me.

– Former foster care youth

As many children, youth, and family professionals know, facilitating permanency for youth in foster care can be very challenging work (Charles & Nelson, 1998, Mallon, 2005). Facilitating permanency for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning) teens has additional, but not insurmountable, challenges. As evidenced by the narrative above, many youth that have been in the child welfare system have experienced multiple placements, witnessed many relationships come and go, and are at a challenging crossroads between childhood and adulthood.

The child welfare system has maintained in its policies and practices a very clear focus for younger children in need of permanency, but has been less explicit in its efforts toward facilitating permanency for adolescents. The practice and professional literature (Fiermonte & Renne, 2002) is clear about the benefits and the importance of permanence to adolescents, and equally clear about how continued instability increases the long-term risks for teens, which may continue well into adulthood.

This article explores the promise in and the challenges of providing permanency for LGBTQ youth. It is organized first by a review of the concept of permanency for LGBTQ adolescents, followed by a comprehensive review of each of the permanency options available for youth. Additionally, this article focuses on ways in which promising professional child welfare practices and approaches can be incorporated into facilitating permanency for LGBTQ youth in foster care and on ways agencies can address the needs of youth in a changing child welfare system.
Permanency for LGBTQ Youth

During the 1990s, the needs of LGBTQ youth came to be increasingly understood (Mallon 1992, 1997, 1998a, 1999, 2001). Mallon (1998a) has described three groups of LGBTQ youth in foster care who are in need of a range of services:

1. youth who are rejected by their families of origin when they disclose their sexual orientations or gender identities or their orientations/identities are discovered by parents, and who then enter foster care because of these issues;

2. youth who leave home or are rejected by their families of origin for reasons unrelated to their sexual orientations or gender identities, or who leave home for reasons that initially seem unrelated to sexual orientation and gender identity, but, upon closer examination, are associated with these issues (e.g., truancy or parent conflict that resulted from parents’ discomfort with the youth’s friends); and

3. youth in foster care for long periods of time who disclose their sexual orientations or gender identities while living in foster care or in other alternative living arrangements.

Research suggests that LGBTQ youth in foster care need a range of physical and mental health services as well as educational supports and services, but that they confront barriers in accessing these services because of their sexual orientations or gender identities (Avery & Freundlich, 2006; Mallon, 1998b; Mallon, 2010).

With few exceptions (Jacobs & Freundlich, 2006; Mallon, Aledort, & Ferrera, 2002), there has been little emphasis on permanency-related services for LGBTQ youth. The few studies that have focused on permanency outcomes for this group of young people in foster care have found, consistent with Mallon’s categorization of LGBTQ youth based on their reasons for entering care, that LGBTQ youth often are not reunited with their birth families (Sullivan, 1994) and that they often lack permanent connections to their communities and families of origin (Mallon et al.). Although there has been a recent initiative funded by the Children’s Bureau at the Lesbian and Gay Center in Los Angeles that holds promise for positive outcomes in permanency for LGBTQ youth and a number of local initiatives in other areas of the country that have been focusing on recruiting and retaining foster homes for LGBTQ youth, many of the factors traditionally associated with positive permanency outcomes have not generally been present for LGBTQ youth. Mallon (1992, 1997), for example, documented the negative experiences of LGBTQ youth in their foster care placements, which frequently are group care facilities where permanency is not a focus. His and other studies have found that LGBTQ youth often are the targets of discrimination, harassment, and violence from peers, group care facility staff, and other caregivers (Mallon, 2001; Mallon et al.; Sullivan, Sommer, & Moff, 2001), resulting in decisions by many LGBTQ youth to run away from their group homes rather than remain in hostile environments (Sullivan et al.). Sullivan, Sommer, and Moff (2001) also found that, in some cases, LGBTQ youth are placed in psychiatric facilities, where permanency is not a focus, because no other placement resource is available for them.

Permanency for LGBTQ youth appears to be further challenged by other factors. Mallon (2001) and Mallon et al. (2002) found that LGBTQ youth are more often placed in group care and often experience multiple, unstable placements. Mallon (2001) found that LGBTQ youth were ejected from some agency placements because staff members were uncomfortable with the youths’ sexual orientations. Mallon et al. (2002) found in their sample of 45 LGBTQ youth that the average number of placements for LGBTQ youth was 6.35, a finding that the researchers...
associated with non-affirming placements that either passively encouraged LGBTQ youth to leave their placements by neglecting their needs or that actively discriminated against them. Mallon (2001) attributed the frequent moves for LGBTQ youth to four factors: staff members do not accept youth’s sexual orientation; youth feels unsafe because of his or her sexual orientation; youth’s sexual orientation is seen as a “management problem”; and youth is not accepted by peers because of his or her sexual orientation.

Research has clearly documented poor outcomes for youth when they leave foster care without the benefit of permanent family or committed adults. Studies have shown that youth who lack permanency face significant risks of poverty, homelessness, and victimization (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Courtney et al., 2005). For LGBTQ youth, the failure to achieve permanence also heightens the risk of social isolation, loneliness, discriminatory treatment and harassment, and physical and sexual abuse. Because of these safety and well-being risks, LGBTQ youth have significant needs for the security and support of a nurturing, accepting, and affirming families.

When considering practice strategies to ensure the safety of an LGBTQ adolescent, to achieve permanency in placement, and to support the young person’s overall well-being, one must be cognizant of the LGBTQ youth’s unique developmental process (Mallon, 2010). LGBTQ youth struggle with all of the same developmental tasks as their heterosexual counterparts while, at the same time, they face unique developmental tasks, in that they must negotiate coming of age as an LGBTQ youth. LGBT youth, unlike their straight counterparts, must make important safety-related decisions about whether or not to come out and to whom they should come out, or not. LGBTQ youth also must determine the relative safety of their communities, their schools, their social networks of peers, and their families with respect to the disclosure of their LGBT identities. In many cases, without adult guidance, LGBTQ youth must identify services specific to their gender and sexual orientations that will meet their needs. These are not tasks usually associated with heterosexually-oriented teens. As such, these additional developmental tasks cause LGBT youth stress, which requires that they develop a set of coping mechanisms that will help them to navigate this stage of their lives. All youth need stability to appropriately tackle developmental tasks. For some, the answer is legal permanence. For others, the answer is caring adults (both kin and non-kin) who can provide the stability to help them make the transition to adulthood. Taking reasonable steps to secure permanence is critical to ensuring that youth find stability without becoming lost in the system.

A Range of Permanency Alternatives for LGBTQ Youth

There is an array of permanency outcomes that should be guided by a youth’s involvement in every aspect of this process, and that should be considered desirable for LGBTQ youth, beginning with consideration of the benefits of keeping youth at home safely with their parents or relatives to prevent the trauma of unnecessary separation and placement. If LGBTQ youth cannot return home within the timeframes of 12 to 15 months established by federal law, then alternative permanency options, guided by the youth’s own voice and involvement, should be pursued, including: adoption by relatives, foster parents, or a new family; legal guardianship with relatives, fictive kin, foster parents or another caring adult; and, in special circumstances, another planned alternative living arrangement with relatives or foster parents, each with attention to lifetime family connections that can be nurtured and preserved. While there is no one correct outcome for achieving permanency for LGBTQ youth, the challenge is to arrive at the best permanency outcome in a timely manner that offers the greatest measure of emotional and legal permanency for every young person (Greenblatt &
Day, 2000). Each of these permanency options will be examined below in terms of how they apply specifically to LGBTQ youth.

Broadening the Concept of Permanency for LGBTQ Youth

The permanency needs of LGBTQ youth are no different than their heterosexual counterparts’ needs for permanency. All young people need the love, nurturing, stability, commitment, and unconditional acceptance offered by a family of origin or a family of choice.

In recent years, some unique program models for achieving permanence for older youth have emerged (Mallon, 2010). Permanency has been redefined and a range of permanency options has come to be recognized. Permanency, as defined by the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections (NRCPFC), is seen as both a process and a result that includes involvement of the youth as a participant or leader in finding a permanent connection with at least one committed adult who provides a safe, stable, and secure parenting relationship; love, unconditional commitment, and lifelong support in the context of reunification; and a legal adoption or guardianship, where possible, in which the youth has the opportunity to maintain contacts with important persons.

In keeping with this broad definition, permanency options have come to be recognized as involving one or more of the following: a legal relationship through adoption or guardianship; physical permanency—that is, a place to be; and relational permanency—that is, a relationship with a caring adult. This understanding has grown out of the idea that youth themselves most often view their permanency needs as primarily relational, then physical, and, finally, and only in some cases, legal. Within this framework, there has been a further refinement of the range of permanent options for youth: maintaining youth safely in their own homes and with their families of origin, followed by reunification with family, is recognized as the primary option to be pursued whenever possible; adoption is more broadly accepted as a viable option for youth; and connections with caring, committed adults are increasingly recognized as a powerful option for many youth.

I think if it wasn’t for the LGBT Center in New York, the Y.E.S. (Youth Enrichment Services) Program, I would have gotten into a lot of trouble. I might have even gone into foster care. The Center and the people at Y.E.S. were like family to me and my home away from home. I always had a safe place to go and everyone knew me and even my family. It was a safe haven for me as a lesbian teenager. Those years were hard years, but The Center supported me and my mom. I am so grateful that I had them in my life during those years.

– Young adult reflecting on teen years in a Community Based Program in New York City

The first approach to permanency for LGBTQ youth should be to engage them and their families in community-based, family support, or family preservation efforts to prevent out-of-home placement. The best approach to promoting permanency is to preserve LGBTQ youths’ relationships with their families of origin. Depending on the family’s needs and circumstances, these efforts take many forms: planning and coordination of family support services; advocacy for the family with human services agencies; direct provision of goods or services, including intensive, in-home services; and information, encouragement, and emotional support to families. These supports and services are designed to build on family strengths and
make reasonable efforts to prevent placement and/or reunify families. Families of LGBTQ youth need the same supports that all families need, but, uniquely, they need to know how they can keep loving and caring for their LGBTQ family member who comes out in the context of their family. Family preservation services are specifically targeted at families with youth who are at imminent risk for placement. These services are designed to build on the individual skills of family members and enhance the family’s support systems. Effective family support and preservation services should be holistic, intensive and comprehensive, able to respond flexibly to a wide variety of needs, readily available to families, culturally appropriate, and strength-based. This can be challenging in rural communities where LGBTQ-related services may only be accessible in the closest urban area, and transportation and travel distance could further make access to such services difficult. In these cases, use of the Internet, although less optimal than face to face contact, may be very useful as a support mechanism for families.

Although many families can move forward after the initial crisis of disclosure, some families will need the assistance of skilled community-based child welfare professionals who understand the dynamics of LGBTQ youth and who can help families negotiate the sometimes chilly waters of an initial LGBTQ disclosure.

Working with LGBTQ youth in community-based settings to assist families in staying together is a positive approach to ensuring that permanency outcomes are achieved with children and youth. Millions of LGBTQ youth are already engaged in positive youth development approaches within their own communities. Youth workers and other professionals should look upon these community-based systems as effective approaches to facilitating permanency for LGBTQ adolescents.

Reunification as a preferred permanency option

My mom and I had a lot of problems — some of it had to do with me hiding the fact that I was a lesbian, and some of it didn’t have anything to do with that at all. I got placed in this group home after my mom and I had this terrible fight, and I thought at that point, “Oh, well, that’s the end of that — I’m out of the house and there is no going back.” But that wasn’t true at all. I had this incredible social worker who not only helped me and my mom mend our relationship, but she got me to talk to my mom about my sexual orientation. Once I started that discussion, I felt more comfortable to be myself and, within eight months, I moved back home.

– Youth in Foster Care

As with any youth at any point in a stay in foster care, the most logical starting point, in meeting their permanency needs, is the youths’ families of origin: their parents and members of their extended families. Exploration of reunification is particularly vital for LGBTQ youth if they come into foster care following disclosure of their sexual orientations or gender identities, or their parents’ discovery of this information through other means. It is not uncommon that parents’ initial reactions upon this disclosure or discovery may be outrage, shock, and disbelief, feelings that may escalate into a crisis, with violence possibly directed toward the youth, the youth being ejected from the home, or the youth fleeing the home for safety (Mallon, 2010; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, & Diaz, 2010). Although the initial response may be traumatic for the youth and family, families often experience changes in their feelings and perceptions about their children’s
sexual orientations and gender identities. With skilled intervention, education, counseling, and support, many families are able to begin to accept their child's sexual orientation or gender identity, and, with continued support and assistance to the family and youth, the youth can safely return home. Community resources can be especially helpful in this process. Families should be referred to LGBTQ-friendly therapists, LGBTQ community centers, and LGBTQ-affirming faith-based congregations. In addition, PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), a volunteer organization with chapters throughout the United States comprising parents and family members of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people, can provide families with support.

When LGBTQ youth have been in foster care for a long period of time, it is important to reconsider the youth's family of origin and re-evaluate reunification as a possible permanency plan. The family’s circumstances may have changed, and they may be able to offer the youth the safety, nurturance, and support of family once again. As with any reunification after a long separation, families need to become reacquainted with their child and learn who the child is, including coming to know and understand the youth in the context of his or her sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Counseling, education, and support from LGBTQ-competent organizations can be very helpful in this process.

Permanency with Caring Adults in Youths' Lives: Adoption, Guardianship, and Kinship Care

When reunification with a youth's parent or extended family members is not possible, it is essential that other potential permanent resources for LGBTQ youth be identified. Across the United States, several new programs have been developed over recent years that utilize a youth-driven permanency process, involving youth in their own permanency planning and supporting the identification of individuals in the youth’s life who could be a permanent resource for the youth. In these programs, specially trained social workers work with youth over a period of time to assist youth in identifying important and significant adult relationships in their lives, including not only family members, but also teachers, mentors, social workers, church members, coaches, and other adults with whom the youth has had a positive relationship. Specific methods have been developed to search for relatives and to “mine” case records through reading the youth's entire child welfare file in order to identify all important former relationships that the youth has had (Louisell, 2004). These practices can be particularly beneficial to LGBTQ youth because youth are actively involved in identifying potential resources already known to them. Assuming that the youth has disclosed his or her sexual orientation or gender identity, he or she will be able to identify individuals believed to be accepting and affirming.

Legal guardianship is an underused permanency option for most youth. However, this author believes that legal guardianship, particularly in light of the new Fostering Connections legislation, has particular relevance for LGBTQ youth in foster care, as it permits the young person to identify non-related adults (fictive kin) with whom they may be able to form lifetime permanent connections. Guardianship for LGBTQ youth may be more appealing as a permanency pathway, particularly if they have experienced issues related to their LGBTQ identities in adoption situations. LGBTQ youth may have many potential connections (teachers, former social workers, mentors, LGBTQ adults with whom they interact in LGBTQ social service agencies, and even older siblings) that may be interested in a legal guardianship relationship. LGBTQ youth should be encouraged and empowered to make connections with adults who they think are meaningful and important to them in their lives, but it is incumbent on the adults in
their lives to make sure that these connections are stable, safe, secure, and durable.

When youth cannot return to their families of origin and other family members or other significant adults are not already available to them, it is essential that other caring adults be sought for the youth. Prospective adoptive parents (and prospective foster parents) should learn about issues of sexual orientation and gender identity in all preparatory training and should be informed that the children or youth whom they adopt (or foster) may be LGBTQ youth. LGBTQ youth in foster care typically have experienced discrimination and rejection in many ways. As a result, it is essential that they can be assured that prospective adoptive families who are being recruited and trained are welcoming and affirming and are open to adopting (or fostering) LGBTQ youth.

For many years, LGBTQ families have served as foster and adoptive families for children in the foster care system, and they have proven to be excellent resource families (Mallon, 2006). These families may be adoptive resources for LGBTQ youth or may play critical roles as caring, committed adults in youths’ lives. Not all LGBTQ families, however, wish to foster or adopt an LGBTQ youth, and not all LGBTQ youth want LGBTQ parents. As is the case with all efforts to bring together foster and adoptive parents and children and youth, each youth and each family must be considered on an individual basis, taking individual needs and desires into account. In the best interests of LGBTQ youth, it is essential that agencies approach the recruitment of LGBT families in an ethical manner, utilizing the same assessment and preparation process that is used with other families and equally valuing LGBT families as resources (Mallon, 2011).

Not all LGBTQ youth find permanence in adoption or guardianship, and yet all LGBTQ youth should be assisted and encouraged to form permanent connections with caring adults. In many cases, LGBTQ youth who may have had difficulties with their own families may have had to develop connections with other caring adults outside of their families. Some LGBTQ youth have become skilled at developing connections with meaningful adults as an antidote to negotiating environments that are hostile to their LGBTQ identities. Some LGBTQ youth form fictive kinship ties with other older youth and adults whom they consider to be “family.” Mentors can also serve as a wonderful connection for LGBTQ youth—as one young person put it:

My mentor is always there for me—he has seen me at my worst and my best, and he is still a part of my life. He knows what the gay life is like because he has lived it himself. On days when I feel no one is on my side, I know that Pat will always be there for me. He’s always got my back!

Conclusion

LGBTQ youth have not always benefited from efforts at the policy and practice level to ensure permanency for all children and youth in foster care. LGBTQ youth are still all too often placed in group care settings because of their sexual orientations or gender identities, environments in which they are at risk of significant threats to their safety and well-being and where placement-related experiences, such as frequent moves and running away, undermine their opportunities for permanency. LGBTQ youth will not have the benefit of permanent families and caring, committed adults in their lives unless each individual who works with them—each case worker, social worker, supervisor, attorney, guardian ad litem, court appointed special advocate, judge, foster parent, adoptive parent, therapist, and mentor—ensures that every youth is safe, affirmed in their identities, and free from abuse; receives the health, mental health, and educational services that he or she needs; and,
equally important, benefits from concerted efforts to provide youth with a permanent, loving, and affirming family.

The permanency options, as defined by the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), provide for a number of possible pathways for youth to achieve permanency. Although there are no preferred pathways specifically for LGBTQ adolescents, the overuse of Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) (Renne, 2002) and the myth that youth are unadoptable or do not wish to be adopted (Flynn & Welch, 2003; The Center for Child and Family Studies, 2004) are two challenges that child welfare professionals must continue to confront. All youth need and deserve permanency in their lives, and LGBTQ youth are no exceptions.

References


Leading organizations in the fields of immigration and child welfare have come together to increase the effectiveness of the child welfare system’s and other corresponding systems’ response to migration issues.

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Reinstating Parental Rights: Another Path to Permanency?

Susan Getman and Steve Christian

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The call was unexpected. Stunned, Cathy listened carefully as the social worker asked her, “Would you be interested in being part of Mark’s life again?” Some eight years earlier, after she had lost her parental rights, Cathy had hugged her first born, 6-year-old Mark, one last time. She had given him a book with her Social Security number in it, hoping that when he was grown it would help him to find her. As the years passed, she assumed he had been adopted, but he never was. In fact, after several failed placements, he was struggling in a group home. The state child welfare agency’s connection specialist decided to locate and contact Cathy, thinking that she would be able to provide leads to extended family, or that Cathy’s own circumstances might have changed. Indeed, Cathy had turned her life around. As a young parent, she lost her first child due to substance abuse and domestic violence, and she vowed to make the changes that would prevent the loss of another child. She remarried, had another child, and was in college, preparing for a career in social services.

Reunification was not immediately considered. After months of visits and family counseling, however, Cathy, her husband, Mark, and the state social workers all agreed that Mark should be reunified with his mother and her family. In the absence of a statute authorizing the reinstatement of Cathy’s parental rights, Cathy had no recourse but to adopt her first born child. Cathy is now an advocate for a law in her state that would allow a court to reinstate a parent’s rights. She recently completed her social work internship in the same office that removed Mark from her many years ago.

The story of Cathy and her son Mark illustrates that people change and that some parents whose rights have been terminated can provide permanency for their children who would otherwise age out of foster care. It also illustrates

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1 “Cathy” is a pseudonym employed to respectfully protect this birth mother’s privacy.
2 “Mark” is a pseudonym employed to respectfully protect this youth’s privacy.
3 We are indebted to Cathy and Mark for permitting use of their story of courage, resilience, and hope. Cathy was interviewed on 8/30/2010.
the lack of options these parents and their children face. Unlike Cathy, many parents in her situation are not able to regain parental rights through adoption because of restrictive state laws and court decisions. The very policies that are intended to ensure permanency can sometimes be obstacles to re-establishing permanent families.

This article examines an innovative approach to permanency for youth in foster care: reinstatement of parental rights. To demonstrate the rationale for this policy, trends are highlighted regarding youth with the goal of alternate planned permanent living arrangements and those who age out of care with no permanent legal connections to adults. The article also looks at data regarding youth who maintain or seek out connections with birth families after emancipation from foster care. The statutes that authorize reinstatement of parental rights are then analyzed. The article concludes with some brief thoughts about what child welfare agencies and courts should consider as they prepare to implement these new statutes.

New Public Policies Seek to Expand Permanency Planning Options

Over the past six years, eight states have enacted laws that authorize courts to restore a parent’s rights that were involuntarily terminated. These laws do not vacate or reverse the original termination of parental rights per se; in fact, they don’t make any changes to that legal finding. Rather, these statutes allow courts to entertain the possibility that the parent or parents have remedied the problems that resulted in the original termination finding and to consider the youth’s wish to have his or her parent’s rights reinstated. They provide a legal remedy for certain situations in which the rights of a youth’s parents have been terminated, yet the youth has not been adopted.

The Current State of Affairs: The “Best Laid Plans”

In spite of the best intentions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, not all children who become “legally free” for adoption are subsequently adopted by kin or a new family. One 2009 study of children waiting for adoption found that a child’s likelihood of being adopted decreases 80% each year following the termination of parental rights. The study also found high rates of emotional and behavioral problems in this group and that these problems were associated with delays in being adopted (Cushing & Greenblatt, 2009). Systemic factors also weigh heavily. Given that child welfare agencies are overburdened, under-resourced, confronted by high social worker turnover, and challenged to match available families with waiting children and youth, even the best permanency plans do not always come to fruition. Using the end of 2009 for point in time data analysis, a full 37.7% of 16- to 17-year-olds in care had a goal of another planned permanent living arrangement, and an additional 7.1% had no recorded permanency goal (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2010). “Another planned permanent living arrangement” means any plan other than reunification, adoption, guardianship, or permanent placement with a fit and willing relative. In most cases, children with another planned permanent living arrangement goal remain in foster care until they emancipate.

Legal Orphans Adrift

“Legal orphans” are children and youth whose ties to their birth families have been legally severed through the termination of both parents’ rights, but who have not yet been adopted (Brown, 2005). As months roll into years in care for these children, they fall into the group of children who are considered “unadoptable,” often by
Children who are legal orphans face the prospect of aging out of care\(^4\) with no permanent legal relationship with an adult. Upward trends in the number and percentage of youth who age out of care stand in stark contrast to the decline in both the number of children in care and in the percentage of youth who are assigned the permanency goal of another planned permanent living arrangement.

- Although the total number of children in care declined by over 109,000 between FY 2002 and FY 2009, Figure 2 shows that the number of youth who aged out increased by 45%, from 20,358 in FY02 (7% of all exits) to 29,471 in FY09 (10.7% of all exits) (USDHHS, 2010).
- The large increase in the percentage of youth aging out of care is particularly striking, given that the overall number of children in care, aged 12 to 17 with a goal of another planned permanent living arrangement, declined by 25% during this time frame (USDHHS, 2010).

Other data on legal orphans in care are also cause for concern.

- In 2009, 43% of children with no legal parent resided in either congregate care or “independent living” programs, and another 37% resided in non-relative foster care, while only 8% lived in a kinship placement.
- Almost 60% percent had been in care for at least four years.

\(^4\)“Aging out” refers to youth who were in a foster, kin, or congregate care placement upon turning 18 (but increasingly may be up to age 21) and who subsequently leave care to live independently without having established any form of legal permanency and often without reliable adults to count on for present or future support.
Legal orphans were most likely to be African American and to have a case plan goal of adoption, followed closely by another planned permanent living arrangement (USDHHS, 2010). Figure 3 shows that the likelihood of having a goal of adoption decreases with age, with another planned permanent living arrangement becoming the most likely plan after age 16 (USDHHS, 2010). Thus, even while there are documented efforts to move children to permanency prior to their 18th birthday, the reality is that there is a sharp upward trend of youth who are aging out.

**Figure 2. Increase in Both the Number and Percentage of Children “Aging Out,” Despite Overall Exits Remaining Stable (FY09 AFCARS)**

![Graph showing increase in both the number and percentage of children “aging out.”](image)

**Figure 3. Most Recent Case Plan Goal for Youth in Care with Parental Rights Terminated, by Age (FY09 AFCARS)**

![Graph showing case plan goals for youth by age.](image)
The problems faced by these youth who age out of care have been reported in several landmark studies (Courtney et al., 2007; Havalchak, White, & O’Brien, 2008). In comparison with their peers who have not been in foster care, these youth are more likely to have had at least one episode of homelessness; to drop out of high school and be underemployed; to experience problems associated with drugs and alcohol; to struggle with mental illness; to have a child out of wedlock; and to have become involved with the criminal justice system (Courtney et al., 2007; Havalchak, White, & O’Brien, 2008). Given the discouraging odds for youth who age out of care, it is no wonder that many of them seek to re-establish or maintain connections to birth families, even when parental rights have been terminated.

Seeking Birth Family Connections

With “open adoption” policies (Grotevant et al., 2007), family finding programs, adoption by kin, and the advent of various social networking tools, many youth maintain or seek contact with birth families and other relatives in spite of termination of parental rights orders. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act has made resources available to states in the form of competitive grants for, among other things, intensive family finding technologies that identify and locate relatives, including birth parents, who may serve as permanent families for youth in care. At least one state, Illinois, recently enacted a statute that requires the Department of Children and Family Services, under specified circumstances, to support connections between certain youth in care and their parents whose rights were terminated at least three years earlier (section 2-28(4) of the Illinois Juvenile Court Act of 1987).

A study by Courtney and Barth (1996) of older adolescents who were no longer in care found that “a large proportion of youth who have spent a long time in foster care away from their families nevertheless return to their families at exit from care.” This study also notes, “One of the most striking findings of this analysis is the fact that such a large proportion of youths (16.8%), regardless of race or gender, who had already spent at least 18 months in care would eventually be placed with ‘family’ at final discharge from care. Over four-fifths of these youth returned to their biological parents.” The possible benefits and harms of such contact have been explored by several studies. These studies suggest that maintaining some level of contact with birth parents, siblings, and other kin, both during and after foster care, is central to the youths’ healthy adolescent development (Bernstein, 2000; Berrick, Needell, Barth, & Johnson-Reid, 2000; Casey Family Programs, 2000).

The prevalence of youth who have aged out of care and who return to live with one or both birth parents, or who have regular contact with them, has been noted by several studies.

- The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Courtney et al., 2005) found that 17% of respondents at the age of 19 were living with a biological parent. Similar to young adults in the general population, this percentage declined as the respondents aged: 7% were living with a parent at the age of 21, and 7% again at the ages of 23 and 24 (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Rapp, 2010; Havalchak, White, & O’Brien, 2008).

- In an earlier study, 53% of 21-year-old young adults who had aged out of care reported having daily contact either with their mother, father, siblings, or grandparents; 83% had contact with at least one birth family member (such as mother, father, siblings, or grandparents) at least once per week (Courtney et al., 2007).

- Other studies have found similarly high percentages of children remaining in contact with their families after discharge from care (Pecora et al., 2005; White, Havalchak, O’Brien, & Pecora, 2006).
As youth themselves have reported, many youth have maintained or re-established contact with their birth parents, irrespective of the legal status of their parents or the length of time in care. This raises the question: could some of these youth have been supported to establish legal permanency during their adolescence with their birth parents who, years earlier, had lost parental rights? Child welfare agencies may want to consider supporting these post-discharge reunifications and connections, regardless of legal status. From a legal perspective, however, if the birth parent(s) had substantially resolved their earlier difficulties and both the parent(s) and the youth want to be legally reunified, it appears that some policy-supported recourse is needed.

A small group of foster alumni who were consulted in preparation for this article unanimously supported the availability of reinstatement as a permanency option for some youth. None of them, in fact, was aware that, in most states, parents cannot regain their rights if their circumstances change and their son or daughter desires reunification, as discussed below. The youth cautioned that reinstatement should be available only if both the youth and parent want to be reunified and that independent assessments confirm that reinstatement would be a safe and appropriate plan. Expanding the permanency options for legally free youth made sense to these young people. As one young advocate remarked, “Even if it is right for one or two youth a year, it is worth it!” Noting that these reunions most often take place without the support and guidance of social workers, they saw a real advantage to having a formal and thoughtful process for re-establishing family relationships.

State Legislation Breaks New Ground

In the absence of statutory authority to reinstate parental rights, youth and their birth parents have had to resort to other means to re-establish a legal relationship, with mixed results. Reunification on an informal basis leaves children in legal limbo without parental authority or accountability to protect and sustain them. Further, such informal arrangements leave birth parents ineligible for human services that require a parent-child relationship. Laws in many states deny parents whose rights have been terminated legal standing to adopt or obtain legal custody of their birth children (O’Donnell, 2010). In states with statutes that are silent on this issue, some courts have allowed former parents to pursue adoption or custody, while others have not. Even if a parent is allowed to petition to adopt, however, a previous finding of unfitness may automatically disqualify him or her. Affording a birth parent “guardianship” has time-limited value because, in most cases, the legal relationship ends when the youth reaches the age of majority, which in most states is 18 (Mosanyi II, 2002). Another approach that birth parents, having lost their rights, have taken is to seek reversal or vacation of the termination of parental rights. Although reversal generally requires the introduction of new evidence that would likely have changed the result at trial, some courts have vacated termination of parental rights orders on the basis of changed circumstances after entry of judgment (Taylor, 2010).

Based on the growing recognition that existing statutes provided no remedy for legal orphans and their birth parents, states have begun passing laws authorizing reinstatement of parental rights. What might be said to be a slowly growing “legislative trend” led by public policy pioneers began with California in 2005 (section 366.26(i)(2) of the California Welfare and Institutions Code) and was continued by Nevada (section 128.170 of the Nevada Revised Statutes Annotated) and Washington (section 13.34.215 of the Washington Revised Code Annotated) in 2007, Louisiana (article 1051 of the Louisiana Children’s Code Annotated) in 2008, Illinois (section 2-34 of the Illinois Juvenile Court Act of 1987) and Oklahoma...
since these are relatively new statutes, it is too early to assess the frequency with which this legal option is employed, the legal outcome of resulting petitions, and long-term permanency and well-being outcomes of the children involved. It is unclear whether any state is tracking these cases in a formal way. The Children’s Law Center of Los Angeles, however, conducted an informal survey of local judges and attorneys after passage of California’s AB 519 and found that the Los Angeles Juvenile Court was hearing approximately one reinstatement petition per month (L. Heimov, Executive Director, Children’s Law Center of Los Angeles, personal communication, August 21, 2010).

The impetus for policy change in California was the plight of youth in foster care who had been legally freed for adoption but who were likely to emancipate without achieving legal permanency. Some of these youth had re-established a connection with a parent whose rights had been terminated years before and desired to reinstate the legal parent-child relationship. Although most of these youth desired to reunify with their parents, a few did not want to return to live with their parents and only wanted to end their status as legal orphans (L. Heimov, personal communication, August 30, 2010). Courts, however, lacked statutory authority to restore parental rights on behalf of such children.

Judges and attorneys for children in California saw first-hand the limitations of existing policy. In a 2004 case, the California Court of Appeals noted the lack of legal options for some older youth in care. It denied a petition to revoke a prior termination of parental rights when a plan of adoption by the youth’s birth father failed. The language read:

We join the trial court and county counsel in observing the harshness of the result we reach. Because the court has no jurisdiction, the shared desire of the minor and of the aspiring presumed father must be frustrated despite the fact that the adoption that was anticipated . . . is no longer likely, regardless of whether granting the request would be in the minor’s best interest. In all likelihood, Jerred will be left a “legal orphan,” despite the recognized disfavor of such status . . . . To avoid such an unhappy consequence, legislation may be advisable authorizing judicial intervention under very limited circumstances following the termination of parental rights and prior to completion of adoption. (In re Jerred H., 121 Cal. App.4th 793 (2004))

Following this invitation from the court, the Children’s Law Center of Los Angeles (CLC) and the Judicial Council of California co-sponsored AB 519 in 2005 to allow courts to reinstate parental rights under specified circumstances. CLC argued:

Children who are never adopted should not have to suffer the permanent loss of their legal relationships to their parents, siblings, and other relatives, including their rights to parental support and to inherit from family members. Nor

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5 In 2009, Minnesota considered, but did not enact, a bill regarding reinstatement of voluntarily relinquished parental rights. Minn. H.F. 1462, § 3.support.
should they bear the stigma of being labeled a legal orphan. (Senate Judiciary Committee Staff Analysis of AB 519, 2005)

The adoption community initially opposed the bill, fearing that it would have a chilling effect on adoptions. They argued that families would be reluctant to adopt children from foster care knowing that a former parent might seek to interfere with a pending adoption by means of the reinstatement process (L. Heimov, personal communication, August 31, 2010).

The bill was amended to address the concerns raised by adoption advocates, who ultimately dropped their objections. The enacted legislation provides that only the child may file a petition for reinstatement. In addition, the law provides that only children who are not likely to be adopted and whose best interests would be served by reinstatement are eligible for relief. Although the statute imposes no minimum age requirement on petitioners, it requires a three-year waiting period from the date of termination before a reinstatement petition can be filed, unless the child welfare agency stipulates that the child is not likely to be adopted within that time.

As stated above, passage of AB 519 started a legislative trend. The California legislation was recognized as a new way to address the problem of legal orphans at little or no additional cost to states. States took different approaches to the variety of policy issues presented by reinstatement. For a more detailed description of the statutes, see Appendix A.

**Waiting period:** A waiting period allows time for achievement of the child’s permanency goal, usually adoption. Most states elected to institute a waiting period of one to three years before a reinstatement petition can be filed. Louisiana and Nevada have no waiting period. No state other than California provides for an exception to the waiting period.

Who may file petition: Most states allow the child or the child’s attorney, guardian ad litem, or legal custodian to file a petition. Most of these states require the child to have reached a minimum age, ranging from 12 to 15. California and Nevada have no minimum age requirement. A few states allow the child welfare agency to file a petition on behalf of the child and, in Illinois, only the agency can file a petition. New York is the only state that allows a birth parent to file.

**Trial home visit:** Three states—Hawaii, Oklahoma, and Washington—authorize or require a trial home visit of up to six months before a final order of reinstatement may be granted. Before a trial home visit is ordered, the court conducts a preliminary hearing on the merits of the petition and may grant temporary or conditional reinstatement for the period of the home visit. If the visit is successful, the court will enter a final order. If not, the petition will be dismissed.

**Role of child welfare agency:** Most reinstatement statutes impose some duties on the child welfare agency. Only California and Nevada do not have such provisions. All of the other states require the agency to submit reports to the court at various stages of the proceedings, including reports that address the parent and child’s situation and readiness for reinstatement and the diligent efforts made by the agency to achieve permanency through adoption or guardianship. The three states that require trial home visits require the agency to supervise the visit, develop a permanent plan of reunification, and provide transition support services. Washington has added a requirement that the agency notify an eligible child about the right to petition for reinstatement if the parent contacts the department, supervising agency, or guardian ad litem about reinstatement.
Criteria for entry of reinstatement order: In all states, a court may order reinstatement only if it finds that reinstatement is in the child’s best interest. All states except Louisiana also require a finding that the child is not likely to achieve an alternative permanency plan. Half of the states require a finding that there has been a material change in circumstances or that the parent has remedied the conditions leading to termination of parental rights. Three states require the court to consider the age and maturity of the child. Illinois requires the court to consider the specific grounds for the finding of unfitness in the original termination. New York excludes from reinstatement parental rights that were terminated for reasons of severe or repeated abuse. New York also requires the consent of the petitioner in the original termination proceeding (usually the child welfare agency) or a finding that such consent was withheld without good cause.

Effect of reinstatement order on earlier termination decree: Statutes in Hawaii, Oklahoma, and Washington expressly state that an order of reinstatement does not vacate or affect the validity of the original termination order. The Oklahoma and Washington laws add that a reinstatement order acknowledges that conditions since the earlier termination have changed and that reunification is now appropriate.

Implications for Practice Implementation

The new laws will require thoughtful implementation and changes in attitudes and practice, both for courts and for child welfare agency leadership and social work staff. Frank and open conversations between these two systems and among other stakeholders will deepen understanding of the need for this new avenue to permanency.

Child welfare leaders will want to consider how to prepare their social workers for the related, and often complicated, conversations with birth parents and with the youth themselves. Agency heads should think about the professional development needed to support social workers and supervisors in preparing to reconsider a parent against whom, just a few years earlier, they had built a case for termination of rights. As the permanency supervisor of Mark’s worker observed:

To get to the point of the termination of parental rights TPR, you need to believe that a parent won’t change within the time required by the child’s needs and by federal timelines. Considering a reinstatement of parents’ rights requires that both agency leadership and social workers need to be open to a new view of the parent and believe that parents can change.

Another issue is ensuring that youth and their attorneys are aware of the right to petition. Some of the young alumni of care consulted for this article recommended establishing processes to inform youth of the reinstatement option after termination of parental rights, but without instilling premature hopes for reunification and turning them against adoption. Washington is the only state whose law requires the agency to notify the youth of this right, but only if the birth parent first contacts the agency or the guardian ad litem. Child welfare agencies, the courts, and guardians ad litem, among others, all share responsibility to ensure that youth in foster care who meet the minimum eligibility criteria are notified of the reinstatement option. Youth and their birth parents should know about this potential pathway to permanency.

Child welfare agency leaders will also want to consider the effect, if any, of reinstatement on a youth’s eligibility for independent living services, education and training vouchers, tuition waivers,
Medicaid, and services to support the transition to permanency. The potential for loss of benefits such as these may act as a disincentive to taking advantage of the reinstatement option, and should prompt state policymakers to review and perhaps amend the relevant state eligibility criteria, to the extent that is consistent with federal law. Moreover, these services and benefits can themselves support the transition to permanency through reinstatement of parental rights. For example, youth wondered what provision could be made for extension of post-secondary educational supports similar to those provided to some youth who are adopted from foster care.

Providing for reinstatement of parental rights raises other important questions. Youth wondered what, if any, support would be provided to a young person under the age of 21 in the event of a failed reunification. What will be the impact on siblings? Are there family members who can provide supports for the reunification? How will the child welfare agency assess the birth parent(s) and youth's readiness for such a plan? Are there expectations regarding visits, supervised or not, and trial home visits? What services are needed for the youth and birth parent(s) to prepare for and support a successful transition to reunification, and are there providers prepared to offer these services? Can transition services be provided at the same time as congregate care services or through the congregate care provider? Are there other transitional supports that need to be afforded the older youth and family, services or benefits that would have been available to the youth, had he or she aged out of care? Finally, should the agency conduct research and evaluation to assess impact, outcomes, and shifts in practice?

**Conclusion**

The trend of large numbers of older youth aging out of care with no legal permanency has shown no sign of abating; in fact, it has increased dramatically in recent years. Without permanent families to provide support and lifelong connections, the future is bleak for many of those who age out of care between the ages of 18 and 21. Many youth still in care, as well as those who have aged out, have maintained connections with birth mothers and fathers, siblings, and grandparents, both with and without the support of child welfare professionals. Youth long for family connections. Some birth mothers and fathers who, years earlier, had struggled and failed to keep their children safe, subsequently losing their parental rights, have improved their personal circumstances, achieved stability, and strengthened their parenting abilities. Children, once young and vulnerable, have grown older and more competent in their own right. When both youth who have not been adopted and their birth parents are desirous of reunification, these statutes afford them a venue for consideration. It is time to adopt wide peripheral vision and consider laws which allow “looking back to move forward” in the best interest of children.

**Acknowledgements**

We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of our colleagues at Casey Family Programs, particularly David Sanders, Peter Pecora, Erin Maher, Kristen Rudlang-Perman, Dee Wilson, Todd Shenk, Tyler Corwin and Sarah Gesiriech. We are also thankful to the young adults formerly in foster care, who shared their insights with us. Finally, we are indebted to “Cathy” and “Mark,” whose personal experiences sparked our interest in this policy area.

**References**

Ala. Stat. § 47.10.089(h) (1975).


Georgia Senate Bill 292 (2010).


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#### Appendix A

**Summary and Comparison of State Laws Authorizing Reinstatement of Parental Rights**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Required court findings and duties/authority of court</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CA</strong></td>
<td>At least three years from the date of TPR or earlier if agency stipulates child not likely to be adopted</td>
<td>Child for whom court has determined that adoption is no longer the permanent plan</td>
<td>It must appear to court that best interests of child may be promoted by reinstatement</td>
<td>Social worker or probation officer; child’s attorney; child’s tribe, if applicable; former parent</td>
<td>Child no longer likely to be adopted; reinstatement is in best interest of child. For child under 12 for whom plan is not reunification, court must specify factual basis for finding that reinstatement is in child’s best interest.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HI</strong></td>
<td>Child has been in permanent custody for at least 12 months</td>
<td>Child who is 14 or older, child’s GAL, department</td>
<td>Preliminary hearing required within 90 days; at preliminary hearing, court may order temporary reinstatement and trial home visit before a final hearing</td>
<td>Former parent, child’s GAL, department, child’s resource family.</td>
<td>Within 7 days before preliminary hearing, department and GAL shall submit reports to the court that address: Material change in circumstances since TPR, reasons for TPR, parent’s and child’s willingness to resume contact and have rights reinstated, parent’s willingness and ability to be involved in child’s life and accept custody; Department shall develop permanent plan and provide transition services to family during trial home visit, if ordered by court; Department may assess trial home visit and rescind it if in child’s best interest</td>
<td>At preliminary hearing, court may order trial home placement and temporary reinstatement of parental rights upon finding that there has been material change in circumstances; parent is willing to provide care for child; parent is able to provide safe family home or the home can be made safe with the assistance of services; and trial home visit is in child’s best interest. If court issues temporary order, child shall be conditionally placed with parent for up to 6 months. Court will hold hearing after child has been placed with parent for 6 months. At the hearing, court may issue final order of reinstatement and terminate jurisdiction, provided court finds that reinstatement is in child’s best interest, taking into account whether parent has remedied conditions, age and maturity of child and child’s ability to express preference, likelihood of risk to child, parent is able to provide safe home, both parent and child consent to reinstatement, and permanency plan goals for child have not been met and are not likely to be achieved.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<tr>
<td>IL 705 Ill. Comp. Stat. 405/2-28 and 705 Ill. Comp. Stat. 405/2-34</td>
<td>Three years after parental rights were surrendered or terminated with entry of order appointing guardian with power to consent to adoption</td>
<td>Department of Children and Families on behalf of child age 13 or older, or a child who is a younger sibling of such child age 13 or older for whom reinstatement is being sought and younger sibling independently meets criteria for reinstatement</td>
<td>Petition must contain allegations required by statute; Any party may move to dismiss motion on the basis that parent has intentionally acted to disrupt child’s adoption</td>
<td>Parties to the juvenile court proceeding</td>
<td>DCFS shall conduct an assessment of the child’s circumstances to assist in future planning, including determining the appropriateness of filing for reinstatement. [705 ILCS 405/2-28 requires DCFS to make reasonable efforts on behalf of youth age 13 or older, whose parents’ rights have been terminated for at least three years, to locate parent(s) whose rights were terminated, assess appropriateness for custody transfer, and, as appropriate, foster and support connections between youth and parent(s)]. While minor was under court jurisdiction, parent surrendered child for adoption or consented to adoption or had rights terminated and guardian appointed with power to consent to adoption; since then, minor has remained ward of court or returned to care with termination of a guardianship or an adoption; the minor is not currently in placement likely to achieve permanency; reinstatement is in minor’s best interest; parent wishes rights to be reinstated and is appropriate to have rights reinstated; more than 3 years has lapsed since consent or surrender or entry of order; child is 13 or older or is the younger sibling of a child 13 or older who is seeking reinstatement and sibling meets other requirements; if court has previously denied motion for reinstatement, there has been substantial change in circumstances. In ruling on motion, court shall consider reasons why child was initially brought to court’s attention, the history of the child’s case as it relates to parent, and current circumstances of parent. If reinstatement is being sought after finding of unfitness, court shall consider such grounds and also consider “best interest” factors in statute. If case is post-disposition, court shall schedule matter for permanency hearing. Custody shall not be restored to parent except by order of court pursuant to 2-28(4).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>LA</strong></td>
<td>Child in foster care over the age of 15</td>
<td>Make diligent effort to locate parent and inform him or her of effects of restoration; Submit report detailing change in parent’s circumstances, reasons for TPR, willingness of parent and child to have parental rights restored</td>
<td>Parents, foster parents, CASA volunteer</td>
<td>Best interest of child; consent of parent. Court may allow contact between parent and child, restore parental rights, or place child in the custody of parent, with or without continuing supervision of CW agency. If agency, counsel for child, CASA volunteer, and parent stipulate that restoration of rights or parental contact is in child’s best interest, court may enter judgment to that effect without hearing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NV</strong></td>
<td>Child, legal custodian, or guardian of child</td>
<td>Parent must consent in writing to restoration of parental rights</td>
<td>Parents, child’s legal custodian or guardian, person or entity that petitioned for TPR, child’s attorney</td>
<td>Child who is 14 or older consents to restoration; parent has been informed of legal obligations and rights and is willing to accept them; child is not likely to be adopted; restoration of rights is in child’s best interest; for child under 14, court shall specify factual basis of best interest finding.</td>
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<td><strong>NY</strong></td>
<td>Two years after order committing guardianship or custody of child</td>
<td>Attorney for child age 14 or older, agency, or individual to whom guardianship and custody of child have been committed, respondent in the TPR proceeding, or his/her attorney</td>
<td>Court may issue summons to child, guardian and custodian, respondent in TPR proceeding</td>
<td>Court shall direct local CW agency to supervise birth parent during pendency of conditional order restoring parental rights; develop reunification plan; provide transition services; and report to parties, child’s attorney, and court 30 days before expiration of the period specified in conditional order</td>
<td>Restoration of rights is in child’s best interest, order Committing custody of child was based on provisions relating to abandonment, mental illness, or permanent neglect (not severe or repeated abuse), all parties have consented to restoration of rights or, if the petitioner in the TPR proceeding failed to consent, such failure was without good cause. Court shall state its reasons for disposition of the petition. Court may: 1) grant petition, modify order of disposition in TPR proceeding, and transfer guardianship and custody of child to birth parent, provided that the findings of fact on which TPR was based shall remain; 2) Dismiss the petition; or 3) Grant the petition conditionally for up to 6 months during which custody remains with local CW agency and child may visit with or be placed on trial discharge with birth parent. Court shall hold hearing for permanent restoration and state reasons for determination.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**N.Y. Fam. Ct. Act, §§ 635-637**
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<td>OK</td>
<td>Three years after TPR</td>
<td>Child age 15 or older</td>
<td>At a preliminary hearing to consider apparent fitness and interest of parent, court finds that best interests of child may be served by reinstatement; application shall be dismissed if parent not located</td>
<td>Department, child’s attorney, child, former parent, foster parent or relative guardian, GAL, child’s tribe</td>
<td>Department shall provide the court information related to efforts to achieve permanency, including efforts to achieve adoption or permanent guardianship; Department shall develop permanency plan for reunification and provide transition services after temporary order of reinstatement</td>
<td>Court shall conditionally grant application if it finds that child has not and is not likely to achieve permanency and reinstatement is in child’s best interest. Court shall consider whether parent has remedied conditions; age and maturity of child and ability to express preference; whether reinstatement will be risk to child; and other material changes in circumstances. If court conditionally grants application, case continued for 6 months and temporary order of reinstatement entered, during which child placed with parent. If child must be removed during 6 months, court shall dismiss application. Court shall hold hearing after 6 months and order reinstatement if placement successful. Court will close deprived action. Reinstatement does not vacate original TPR, but acknowledges change in circumstances. Department not liable for damages, etc.</td>
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**Oklahoma Stat. Ann. tit. 10A, § 1-4-909**

- Three years after TPR
- Child age 15 or older
- At a preliminary hearing to consider apparent fitness and interest of parent, court finds that best interests of child may be served by reinstatement; application shall be dismissed if parent not located
- Department, child’s attorney, child, former parent, foster parent or relative guardian, GAL, child’s tribe
- Department shall provide the court information related to efforts to achieve permanency, including efforts to achieve adoption or permanent guardianship; Department shall develop permanency plan for reunification and provide transition services after temporary order of reinstatement
- Court shall conditionally grant application if it finds that child has not and is not likely to achieve permanency and reinstatement is in child’s best interest. Court shall consider whether parent has remedied conditions; age and maturity of child and ability to express preference; whether reinstatement will be risk to child; and other material changes in circumstances. If court conditionally grants application, case continued for 6 months and temporary order of reinstatement entered, during which child placed with parent. If child must be removed during 6 months, court shall dismiss application. Court shall hold hearing after 6 months and order reinstatement if placement successful. Court will close deprived action. Reinstatement does not vacate original TPR, but acknowledges change in circumstances. Department not liable for damages, etc.
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<th>Duties and authority of CW agent</th>
<th>Required court findings and duties/authority of court</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>Three years after TPR, if child has not achieved permanency</td>
<td>Child age 12 or older, or younger if good cause is shown</td>
<td>Best interest of child may be served by reinstatement of parental rights</td>
<td>Department, child’s attorney, child, former parent, existing parent, current caregiver, child’s tribe</td>
<td>Provide notice to former parent, existing parent, current caregiver, or child’s tribe; Provide to the court information related to its efforts to achieve permanency plan, including adoption or permanent guardianship; Develop a new permanency plan of reunification after conditional grant of petition for reinstatement; If child is eligible to petition juvenile court and parent contacts department, supervising agency, or GAL regarding reinstatement, the department, supervising agency, or GAL must notify child about right to petition for reinstatement</td>
<td>Conditional grant of petition: child has not achieved permanency plan and is not likely to do so; reinstatement is in child’s best interest. Court shall consider fitness of parent; age and maturity of child; whether reinstatement poses risk to child; and other material changes in circumstances that warrant granting the petition. Upon conditional grant of petition, case is continued for 6 months, during which child is placed with parent. If child must be removed from parent during this time, court shall dismiss petition. If placement is successful, court order reinstating rights remains in effect and dependency is dismissed. Court order does not affect validity of original TPR but recognizes that situation has changed since TPR. Parent whose rights are reinstated not liable for child support owed to department during period from TPR to reinstatement. State not liable for civil damages resulting from services under this section.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adopt Cuyahoga’s Kids: Securing Adoptive Placements for Older Youth in Cuyahoga County’s Public Child Welfare System

Sue Pearlmutter, Victor Groza, Teresa Garafolo, and Betsie Norris

Sue Pearlmutter is dean and professor of the School of Social Work at Rhode Island College. She has studied and written about public social service organizations and their services to families and children, including child welfare, cash assistance, child care, and Medicaid. She has been an evaluator for innovative projects in all of these systems.

Victor Groza, Ph.D., is the Grace F. Brody Professor of Parent-Child Studies at the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH. For over 25 years, he has conducted research and participated in the evaluation of projects that targeted older children adopted from the public system. He has worked in the field of permanency not only in the U.S., but also in Romania, Ukraine, India, Guatemala, and Ethiopia.

Teresa Garafolo is a program evaluator in the area of adoption and foster care. She is a doctoral candidate at Walden University.

Betsie Norris is the founder and executive director of Adoption Network Cleveland. Founded in 1988 with a wide array of programs and services, the organization serves as a successful national model for effective service and advocacy for members of the adoption community, including adoptees, adoptive parents, birth parents, youth in foster care, and related professionals. Adoption Network Cleveland serves as the lead agency for Adopt Cuyahoga’s Kids programming and has helped over 450 youth find homes since 2004. She is co-author with Jayne Schooler of Journeys After Adoption: Understanding Lifelong Issues.

Overview

Cuyahoga County is the largest county in northeast Ohio. The county is primarily urban, with Cleveland, its largest city, surrounded by more than 50 urban and suburban communities. Cleveland is consistently identified as one of the poorest cities in the country (Badenhausen, 2010). Mounting home foreclosures, job losses, and severe budget declines, along with high unemployment, are hallmarks of the community.

In 2004, the Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services (CCDCFS) had almost 4,000 children in its custody, and the department was serving more than 6,000 children each month. Of all the children in custody, 52% (n = 1,989) were aged 13 or over. Among the 1,455 children in permanent custody, where parental rights had been severed, 58% (n = 844) were aged 13 or over. Of the 844 youth aged 13 and over and in permanent custody, 57% were male (n = 481) and 81% (n = 684) were children of color. This project served a subset of those children who were freed for adoption but for whom a family had not yet been identified.

Almost eight years after the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act, the department struggled to achieve timely permanency for children aged 9 or older and to meet the federal Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) outcomes. During this same period, United Way of Greater Cleveland established a group of community panels to examine the needs of
vulnerable children and adults in the community who might be helped through collaborative initiatives. The Strong Families = Successful Children panel included civic leaders, funders, child advocates, child welfare leaders, and adoption professionals. The panel recognized that the number of children awaiting adoption in the child welfare system presented significant challenges to the department and to the broader community. Its members determined to provide initial funding for a three-year collaborative effort to reduce the number of waiting children in the public child welfare system. Cuyahoga County provided additional funding, along with local foundations and the federal Children’s Bureau. The Children’s Bureau grant supported activities specifically for youth aged 13 and over.

This effort targeted children who had been in the permanent custody of the department for more than a year with no adoptive family resource identified. It focused on adoption as the primary road to permanency. It also featured a public-private partnership between several community-based organizations and CCDCFS and was known as Adopt Cuyahoga’s Kids (ACK). Initially, a cohort of 656 children was identified to receive services. These were children and youth who had been available for adoption for more than one year, but for whom no adoptive family had been identified. During year two of the project, the cohort was augmented, as additional children and youth were available for adoption, but lacked a family resource. The cohort then consisted of a total of 781 children and youth.

In 2004, 301 of the original group (46% of the original cohort) were aged 13 or over. During the course of the project, 239 children joined the oldest group or reached the age of 13 and were added to the oldest group. This paper focuses on these 540 youth (69% of the cohort of 781 children and youth), the oldest children in the cohort.

Characteristics of the Youth Aged 13 and Over in the Cohort

The youth in this focus group ranged in age from 13 to 22.7 years. The median age was 17.5 years, but the largest group of youth (30.7%, \( n = 166 \)) was aged 19 and over. Fifty-nine percent of the youth (\( n = 319 \)) were male and 41% (\( n = 221 \)) were female. Eighty-three percent of the youth (\( n = 444 \)) were African American, while 17% (\( n = 92 \)) were Caucasian. The length of time during which these youth had been in the county’s permanent custody ranged from two to 15 years. The median length of time was five years, and the largest group of children had been in permanent custody for three years (21%, \( n = 93 \)). Table 1 shows all of these data.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the ACK youth cohort (\( N = 540 \))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Item</th>
<th>( N )</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age of Child in Years</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 – 14.9 years</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 – 16.9 years</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 – 18.9 years</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 and over</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>30.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>59.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>444</td>
<td>82.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length of Time in Permanent Custody of the County</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 – 4 years</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>47.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 – 7 years</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 – 10 years</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 years or more</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( a \) Date of permanent custody was recorded for only 440 youth.

Source: ACK data file; Analysis: Pearlmutter
Structure of the Public-Private Partnership

The overall goal of ACK was to reduce the backlog of children and youth waiting for adoptive families and to create change in the system so that there would not be a backlog in the future. Additional goals were to improve the adoption system and process for adoptive families; to support post-adoptive families and children; to advocate for public policies that would support adoption of children in permanent custody; and to encourage local businesses and other community organizations to become partners in recruiting and supporting adoptive families.

To accomplish these goals, the United Way’s Strong Families = Strong Children panel determined that the public-private partnership should have a lead agency and selected Adoption Network Cleveland (ANC) to meet this responsibility. ANC was a small, private organization that had provided services to adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive families, but had not served children in the public child welfare system directly. CCDCFS was the public agency partner. Its director recognized the value of community partnerships and provided significant support to the effort, including funding, a dedicated unit of workers within the project, and strong cooperation from staff and administrators. Other partners in service delivery were 15 social service/child welfare agencies that had maintained foster care and/or adoption placement services in the county. Staff of these agencies and members of the dedicated unit in CCDCFS provided most of the direct services to children and youth. ANC administered the project and provided direct services to the older youth in the cohort. Interventions planned for the project are described in Table 2.

Rayshaun’s Story

Rayshaun was 15 when he met with his ACK social worker, Rob, for the first time. He had been in his current foster home since he was 7 and he had not seen his mother since he was 5. He was born in Pittsburgh, but he had no memories of living there. He only remembered that his mother had left him with a friend and then was gone. At first, he missed her a lot. As time went on, he found that he could not remember much about her face anymore and he had no pictures.

He had been in one other foster home but he really liked this family and thought he would stay with them. Rayshaun liked school and was doing all right. He talked with his foster mom about wanting to get a job and was planning to take that step in the summer. He liked to be outside, liked the garden in the summer, rode his bike everywhere, and was very proud that he had learned how to swim. Adoption was not on his mind very much until Rob started to talk with him about it.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervention</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Responsible Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Child-centered recruitment (see McKenzie & McKenzie [n.d.] for additional explanation)** | Staff meets with the youth several times to learn about her/his story; develops an assessment of the child based on the story, the record, information from the foster parent and/or other caring adults, and the staff member’s observations (the child profile); and seeks names and information about people in the youth’s life (e.g., family members, teachers, coaches, etc.) who might become resources for adoption  
Staff meets regularly with the youth to strengthen the relationship and build trust  
Staff develops and maintains a relationship with the youth’s worker to assist in all processes with the youth  
Staff uses record review as part of developing the child profile and may identify additional resources  
Staff contacts potential resources to determine interest in the youth, and arranges contact if both parties want to meet  
Staff is encouraged to use other strategies such as permanency teaming to bring together potential resources for adoption in small or large group meetings (this process most resembled the permanency team process described in Casey Family Services, 2009a, 2009b)  
The process of seeking resources continues until a match is made  
Staff stays in touch and continues to work with the youth until adoption finalization | Staff in all partner agencies, including CCDCFS dedicated unit |
| **Mentors or permanency champions** | Staff matches youth with people known to him/her from his/her current or past life in order to provide an ongoing relationship that may or may not lead to adoption  
If known people are not available, “stranger” mentors are recruited, using the Big Brothers Big Sisters model  
Mentors commit to working with the youth for at least one year  
ANC staff provides opportunities for mentor support, individual mentor/mentee meetings, group sessions, and a variety of sponsored activities | ANC staff |
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<tr>
<td><strong>Camp CONNECT</strong></td>
<td>This four- to five-day experience at an overnight camp provides physical activities, discussion, feelings-related work, youth-led activities, and fun with peers. The camp's purposes are to offer youth an environment where they can play and explore, work on dealing with emotions, build their self-esteem, and have fun together. Youth are recruited by ACK staff and by CCDCFS workers. Youth attend an orientation session so they and staff can decide if the camp is a good fit. Camper reunion opportunities follow the camp experience.</td>
<td>ANC staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Link-up – prospective adoptive family meetings</strong></td>
<td>A series of five meetings between youth and prospective adoptive families attempting to resolve potential or real problems and avoid adoption disruption. Focus is on increasing communication and problem solving.</td>
<td>Facilitated by ANC staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Get Real – youth-only sessions with peers and advisors</strong></td>
<td>Monthly meetings for youth with peers. Youth either participate in planning or are responsible for planning activities. Adults who were emancipated or left the child welfare system at age 18 are co-facilitators.</td>
<td>Organized by ANC staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interventions directed at staff</strong></td>
<td>Monthly meetings of all project staff focused on shared education and training, support, and problem solving. Opportunities for learning about resources, new or promising practices, and strategies that could assist staff in their work with youth and families; opportunities for engaging in discussion with peers about youth, possible and actual connections for youth, and preparing youth for adoption.</td>
<td>Staff in all partner agencies; organized by ANC staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public policy/advocacy</strong></td>
<td>Efforts to build awareness of challenges and barriers facing children and youth waiting for adoption and their prospective adoptive families. Development and vetting of appropriate public policy interventions. Advocacy through media, personal conversations, and testimony with legislative entities and government agencies to endorse specific interventions.</td>
<td>ANC staff, consultants, and volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Responsible Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social marketing campaign</td>
<td>An education and awareness campaign to increase visibility and encourage consideration of older youth adoption. Promotes adoption widely and targets education to specific neighborhoods and communities. Uses current marketing methods that target those most likely to participate, through the reasoning that people with the same characteristics already do so. Employs geographic and demographic data for people in neighborhoods where fostering and adoption have already occurred, then examines neighborhood/community assets that will support marketing efforts. Identifies specific strategies, materials, media, and other resources needed to heighten awareness and educate. Deploys all resources over time.</td>
<td>ANC staff, consultants, and volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoption Navigators – potential adoptive family tracking and follow-up</td>
<td>Adoption navigators assist families in their exploration of adoption, in their home study process, and in their adoption. Navigators are trained adoptive parent paraprofessionals. Through telephone and some in-person contact, navigators provide support and encouragement to callers. Navigators work closely with county adoption and foster care recruiters, publicize foster and adoptive parent training, assist with overcoming barriers, and support prospective adoptive parents through the process. Services available to anyone who contacts the navigators. Planned to be central contact for adoption inquiries.</td>
<td>ANC staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-adoptive family supports</td>
<td>Based on the recognition that adoptive families require support, concrete assistance, counseling, respite, or other services, the project intends to expand available resources. A needs assessment for services and supports would be conducted. A certificate for mental health professionals in practice with adoptive families would be offered to train providers in specific strengths, youth and family needs, and problem resolution.</td>
<td>ANC staff, community providers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Responsible Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business community education and outreach</td>
<td>Establish and maintain relationships with businesses to provide awareness and education about adoption, particularly adoption of youth and those in the public child welfare system</td>
<td>ANC staff and volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outreach to encourage in-kind and other resources to assist children and youth waiting for adoption in the public agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sources:** personal communication: T. Lorkovich, January, 2004; B. Norris, December, 2003; Stoiber, 2003

**Rationale for Selected Interventions**

**Legislation Supporting Permanence through Adoption**

McRoy and Madden (2009) discuss the importance of federal legislation in highlighting and emphasizing permanency for youth. Efforts to increase permanency for children and youth in the care of public child welfare agencies have been in place through legislation since the 1980 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (AACWA, Public Law 96-272 [42 USC 601 et seq.]). Among other provisions, the act established the federal government’s role in providing adoption assistance; it strengthened foster care assistance to states and other jurisdictions for needy and dependent children; and it expanded funding to improve child welfare, social services, and Aid to Families with Dependent Children programs. Despite the law’s intent, the number of children in public custody continued to grow during the next 15 years, and the number of adoptions did not increase significantly (Maza, 2000).

The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA) (1994, as amended, P.L. 103-382 [42 USC 622]) assured that placement for adoption or foster care would not be delayed because of race and ethnicity, as well as other characteristics of the child or the prospective foster or adoptive parents. The law also stipulated that states use diligent recruitment efforts to seek potential foster and adoptive families who share the racial and ethnic diversity of the children in need of placement. The 1996 amendment (Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption, Section 1808 of the Small Business Protection Act, P.L. 104-188 [42 USC 1996b]) reaffirmed the provisions of MEPA.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-89) sought to increase positive outcomes for children. It focused on performance and accountability. Among its most significant goals were efforts to increase permanency for children and to reduce the time from placement in foster care to adoption. Wright and Paget (2002) indicated that the law sought:

> . . . a new level of accountability and . . . [asked] for positive differences in the lives of children and families. This act unequivocally established that our national goals for children in the child welfare system were safety, permanency, and well-being . . . [it] recognizes that we do not yet have all the solutions to achieve our goals, but it articulates a clear interest in generating solutions and using new knowledge for system improvements. (p.129)

**Local Support for Adoption**

Late in 2003, the Community Vision Council, Strong Families = Successful Children Task Force in Cleveland, Ohio, issued its report detailing
interventions and strategies to be used to increase the number of children and youth who moved to permanency through adoption (Stoiber, 2003).

According to Stoiber and the Task Force,

The core issue is that there is an unacceptable number of children in permanent custody waiting for adoptive homes. Two underlying assumptions are: 1) Adoptive homes must be found for the backlog of waiting children so that in the future CFS [Child and Family Services] and the private adoption agencies can focus on finding adoptive homes for children entering the system in a timely fashion. 2) There must be system change if CFS and the private adoption agencies are to be more successful in placing children in adoptive homes in the future. (p. 1)

The Task Force then discusses interventions that its members believe will achieve its vision of “a community in which every child lives in a permanent wholesome, nurturing family environment, which is physically and emotionally safe” (p. 4).

Child-specific recruitment is presented as a promising practice, one that has been tried in several other projects, but has not yet built an evidence base (Stoiber, 2003). The practice’s emphasis on recruiting placement resources for a specific youth and with the youth’s assistance is discussed. The report comments that while using these strategies does not guarantee success, failure to do so will assure that no family is found. McKenzie and McKenzie (n.d.) and Freundlich and Gerstenzang (2006) concur that the strategies of child-specific and child-centered recruitment increase the possibilities for achieving adoptive placement. Flynn, Welch, and Paget (2004) recommend recruitment strategies that target adults who already know about adoption as well as adults who might commit to adoption only because of a specific child. Casey Family Programs (2005) and the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC, 2009) recommend recruitment strategies that are culturally sensitive, that educate and engage a community, and that involve youth voices in decisions about placement, recognizing that adolescents have needs that are different from those of younger children.

The Task Force report (Stoiber, 2003) recommended pre- and post-adoption supports for youth and for adoptive families. NACAC (2009) stresses these interventions as well, commenting further that it is essential to allow time for youth and prospective adoptable families to get to know each other and to try to determine if their plan for adoption will work. They recommend fully involving youth and helping them to explore their feelings about adoption, and they indicate the value of preparing youth for adoption through individual and youth/family work. In the second National Convening on Youth Permanence, attendees also supported these interventions (Stuart Foundation, 2003). Later convenings provided additional concurrence with these ideas (see, for example, the summary report from the 2008 convening, available at http://www.caseyfamilyservices.org/ourwork/youthpermanence/). There is agreement as well regarding the need for extensive post-adoption support (Casey Family Programs, 2005; Charles & Nelson, 2000; NACAC, 2009). Families need opportunities to work on communication, problem solving, and behavioral as well as emotional issues. They should have opportunities to learn about available community resources and to meet with peers experiencing similar struggles.

Members of the Task Force suggested a mentoring component because:

Even when young people grow up in high-risk environments, they are likely to have positive outcomes if their lives are characterized by the presence and some measure of continuity of caring relationships with adults, high expectations and engaging activities, and opportunities to make decisions and contributions. (Charles & Nelson, 2000, p. 14)
Having a supportive adult in one’s life may not translate to adoption, but as Charles and Nelson indicate, it has been shown to contribute to youth resilience. A model similar to that used by Big Brothers Big Sisters was suggested, as evaluation of that program has shown positive outcomes. Specifically, connection to a mentor for youth aged 6 to 18 was shown to significantly decrease negative behaviors such as alcohol and drug use and truancy, and to increase more positive behaviors such as school performance and anger management (Tierney & Grossman, 2000).

The role of adoption navigators was discussed in the Task Force report (Stoiber, 2003) as a strategy to overcome systemic barriers to pursuing adoption. Casey Family Programs (2005) and NACAC (2009) also recognize the importance of staff who can be dedicated to helping prospective adoptive parents get through the process of personal exploration, home study, matching, and subsidy questions.

Stoiber (2003) notes the importance of engaging the community and describes two interventions to accomplish this. Social marketing and business and community outreach are expected to result in attention to adoption, actual recruitment, and additional resources for moving children from public child welfare to adoption. Casey Family Programs (2005), Stuart Foundation (2003), and McKenzie and McKenzie (n.d.) agree that both general and targeted awareness and education campaigns can be catalysts for increasing attention to adoption.

Freundlich (2009) indicates that state policy has an effect “in shaping practice designed to achieve and sustain permanence for older children and youth” (p. 141). Most often the effect is to constrict the availability of resource families or information. Policies may give the impression that children are unadoptable; they permit “independent living” to be a permanency goal; older children and youth are excluded from permanency decisions; and far too many youth are placed in group/congregate care when care with a loving and committed family is preferred (Barth, 2002; Ford, Boo, & Kroll, 2005). The Task Force report (Stoiber, 2003) included public policy/advocacy as a role for the project because a child or youth advocacy group that focused on youth waiting for adoption did not exist and because such efforts were essential to achieving system change.

**Methods for Examining Project Outcomes**

To determine the effectiveness of ACK’s efforts to place older youth, a participatory action research framework was used (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Three of the authors were external evaluation consultants who were active participants in the partnership. Immediate feedback was provided to ANC staff in response to questions, problems, and challenges the programs faced, using data collected in this mixed-method study. Ideally, the feedback permitted staff to reflect, change, or maintain direction, as each program sought to achieve its overall goals. Data were collected using the following methods:

- Quantitative data were collected through an administrative database maintained by ANC; the database contained information about each youth’s history in the public child welfare system, assignments to the project staff, and activities within the project; a second administrative database tracked activity of the adoption navigators.
- Quantitative data were collected from surveys with staff, community stakeholders, youth, and adoptive families.
- Qualitative data were collected through interviews, surveys, and focus groups; the authors observed activities, meetings, and specific events; the authors maintained reflective journals and referred to notes when providing feedback or preparing reports.
- Informants included youth, families, staff, and community stakeholders.
Limitations of the Data

Two administrative databases were combined to produce a quantitative dataset for this study. One database was developed for these projects and was maintained by ANC. The second was provided to the authors by staff of the CCDCFS. The resulting dataset is limited by the information available or recorded by staff in these organizations. In addition, these databases were designed for project and caseload maintenance and reporting. Adaptations were made to ensure their viability for this study.

All of the qualitative and quantitative survey and interview data were collected for an evaluation of this project. However, the interview protocols and survey instruments have no known reliability or validity as they were developed specifically for this evaluation. Authors’ notes and journals augmented the qualitative data and interpretation of interview and survey comments. These data meet the qualitative criteria for trustworthiness. The data were collected over a three-year period. They represent the voices of staff, administrators, youth in the project, families, and community stakeholders, all of whom provided expert information from their own experiences.

Results

Youth Aged 13 and Over in the Cohort

On December 31, 2006, when the initial evaluation of the project ended, 151 youth (28% of the 540 youth in the cohort) had been placed for adoption. Ninety-one (60.3%) of those placed had participated in child-centered recruitment (CCR), while 60 youth (39.7%) were placed using traditional child welfare practice strategies. The difference between the number of youth placed using CCR and those placed using traditional practice was statistically significant, $\chi^2 (1, n = 540) = 3.235, p = .044$. Table 3 shows demographic information for all 151 youth placed for adoption according to their participation in CCR or traditional child welfare practice.

Two-thirds of those placed ($n = 102$) were aged 13 – 16.9, 30% were aged 17 – 18.9 ($n = 45$), and the remaining 3% ($n = 4$) were 19 and over. The differences in age of those placed also was statistically significant, $\chi^2 (3, n = 540) = 93.853, p = .000$. A more even distribution of the number of placements across all age groups was expected, rather than the distribution indicated above.

Twenty percent of the youth placed for adoption were white ($n = 30$). Eighty percent of those placed ($n = 121$) were African American. Forty-five percent of those placed ($n = 68$) were young women, while 55% ($n = 83$) were young men. There were no significant differences in placement based on race or gender.

Table 3. Demographics of all placed youth by recruitment type ($n = 151$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Item</th>
<th>CCR</th>
<th>Non-CCR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age of placed youth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 – 14.9 years</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 – 16.9 years</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 – 18.9 years</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 and older</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender of placed youth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race of placed youth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ACK data; Analysis: Garafolo

Binary logistic regression analysis was used to predict the probability of placement given the use of child-centered recruitment or traditional...
child welfare practice. Table 4 shows the results for youth aged 13 and over. CCR, age, and gender were significant predictors of placement, while race/ethnicity and length of time in permanent custody of the child welfare agency were not. The odds of a youth being placed for adoption were 91% more likely if the youth was in CCR. For every year added to a youth’s age, the odds of adoptive placement decreased by 29%. Lastly, boys in the cohort were 57% more likely to be placed for adoption. The logistic regression model that attempted to predict placement was successful 74% of the time.

**Table 4. Results of Binary Logistic Regression (N = 536)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Wald $\chi^2$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCR</td>
<td>-.416</td>
<td>3.164</td>
<td>.040</td>
<td>1.912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.519</td>
<td>84.634</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.718</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.568</td>
<td>6.490</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: ACK data; Analysis: Pearlmutter*

**Outcomes, Strengths, and Challenges of Interventions for the Oldest Members of the Cohort**

Outcomes of interventions are presented below, along with statements reflecting views and perceptions of program staff, agency partners, youth, families, and key community informants. The section begins with interventions that were available to all youth aged 13 or over, and then considers the indirect interventions, those in place for staff and the broader community.

**Interventions for the Oldest Youth**

- **Child-centered Recruitment:** Partner agency staff had strong and positive feelings about most of the strategies used in child-centered recruitment. They especially appreciated the time they were able to spend with youth, exploring their stories, recognizing strengths and resilience, and beginning to understand the anger and sadness of youth who were coping with loss of their biological families. Both staff and youth reported that the work on the child profiles was helpful, but that it was difficult. Youth felt pressured to remember people from the past and it was painful for some; staff members reported that gathering the data took a great deal of time, but that it was the best way to get to know the youth. Permanency teaming to assist in preparation for adoptive placement was encouraged, but not used as expected in the project. Staff did not see it as a benefit and believed it took too much time to schedule and implement meetings. They also believed that they could identify natural supports more easily in individual meetings with youth and caring adults. Both youth and staff agreed that child-centered recruitment was an intensive process and that it was helpful in identifying resources and potential adoptive families.

- **Mentors or Permanency Champions:** The project was not as successful in implementing this intervention. The original agency partner did not remain in the project and ANC staff assumed responsibility. It was challenging to secure mentorship commitments from people known to the child. By the end of the evaluation, 18 mentors worked with youth...
and three of those mentorships resulted in adoptions. For those who did participate, there was appreciation for the opportunities, enjoyment of activities, and several relationships that have been long-lasting and valuable to both the youth and the mentor.

- **Camp CONNECT:** Youth who attended camp rated the experiences as successful. They appreciated the time with peers in similar circumstances; they talked about their memories of activities and people. Some were challenged by the camp routine, by the activities that related to feelings, by the different food, and by other youth who were there. Yet their memories were positive and consistent over time. Most memorable in years two through four was an activity known as **Rayshaun’s Story**

  Rayshaun and Rob talked a lot about Rayshaun’s life. “Rob wanted me to tell him about my mother, her family, and people I knew before. I wanted to, but I couldn’t remember. There were lots of questions, but we did other things, too.” They had baseball tickets, they went to some shows, and Rayshaun went to Camp CONNECT. He surprised everyone with his swimming and even worked to teach some of the younger kids. Rob brought him to Get Real and he became a regular there. “I was pretty quiet at first, just wanted to listen, but I talked about my mother and then being alone. I asked my own questions about being on my own in a couple of years. I saw a few of the kids I met at school. I didn’t know they were like me. That was good.”

  He had told Rob about a Sunday School teacher whom he had really liked, who had joked and talked with him, even staying after church. Rob found Rayshaun’s former Sunday School teacher, Mike, and, after some convincing, he became Rayshaun’s permanency champion and mentor. They started meeting in the fall and by spring they were really close. “I would go there to eat sometimes. Mike and I, we would talk a lot and I liked Sonia too. They were like an auntie and uncle to me. Then I knew what Rob was talking about and I wanted to have them for my family. I could stay at my house, but it didn’t feel the same anymore.” He talked to Rob about his feelings. Then there was a series of meetings: first Rob, Mike, and Sonia met; then Rayshaun met with them. After that were meetings with Rayshaun’s foster parents and a big meeting with all of them and his county caseworker. His life was changing and he wasn’t sure what he wanted. “How could I leave them after they took care of me for so long?” It was confusing for a while as Rayshaun visited with Mike and Sonia, spending more and more time with them. And then it wasn’t confusing as he moved from one home to another. They have had some rough times, but as Rayshaun told the magistrate, “I know this is right. It’s where I want to be. They said they will be there for me and I want to be there for them, too.”
as Digital Me. Each youth worked with a volunteer to produce a video presentation about him or herself. Each presentation featured the youth's choice of music and responses to a series of statements (Things you should know about me . . . Things I like . . . Some things I need help with . . .). Youth designed their presentations and some developed their own content. Staff had designed the activity so that the video could be presented to prospective adoptive parents or in adoption match meetings. Most youth who completed Digital Me over three years enjoyed the process (26 of the 42 who responded to a survey, or 69%), but only 17% of those who responded would share them with adults. Staff and youth reported that it was difficult to find a balance of fun, physical, creative, and serious activities. Staff found that dealing with the complexities of youth experiences and lives was more challenging than they had expected. Finally, safety concerns such as the presence of drugs, sexualized behavior, and testing of limits seemed to override any preparation and staff training.

- **Get Real:** This peer support group consisting of 8 to 15 youth met monthly throughout the project. Topics of discussion were diverse, including career choices, living independently, reconnecting with biological family members, sibling issues, making it through school, and adoption issues, as well as personal/private discussions. ANC staff arranged the sessions; however, volunteers co-facilitated the group. The volunteers, as planned, had been in the child-welfare system and four of the five volunteers over time had “aged out,” or reached 18 without having been adopted. Youth appreciated time with their peers and learning from speakers who had been in the child welfare system or had faced struggles while growing up. Finding and retaining co-facilitators who could be positive role models was challenging, as were attempts to enlarge the group over time. Securing transportation for youth was a major challenge.

- **Link-up:** This intervention, an adoption preparation series, brought together pre-adoptive parents and youth to discuss issues emerging in the potential family’s relationship and to build skills that would preempt future communication and relationship problems. The five-session series was offered seven times between 2004 and the end of 2008. Four to five family groups attended each series, a total of 32 family groups. Participants reported high levels of satisfaction with the support and program activities, with more than 80% of adults and 60% of youth indicating that they appreciated the efforts of staff and the potential for new family members to explore hard/difficult issues. All of the participants indicated that it was difficult to discuss their feelings, but for the most part, they had tried to do so. Two families reported that they had not been able to resolve the challenges they had encountered and were no longer pursuing the adoption. Most challenging was the intensity of feeling in the issues raised in the series.

### Interventions for Staff and the Larger Community

As indicated in Table 2, several interventions were intended to promote and encourage systemic change. While their effects for youth in the cohort were not immediately known, some of these interventions showed promise and their outcomes are discussed here:

- **Learning Community:** The monthly partner agency staff session provided many opportunities for staff training, conversation, information sharing, and enhanced cross-agency relationships. Views of the meetings’ strengths and successes over time varied. Attendance varied as well. Meetings were best when staff assumed
some responsibility for content and process; they were most challenging to partner staff when there was little time for engaging each other in conversation about the work and the youth in the cohort. Nevertheless, the sessions provided ongoing support, clarified expectations, and promoted communication within and across staff. Conversations often centered on older youth in the cohort: preparing youth for adoption, involving youth in planning for their futures, and brainstorming about helping youth to identify supports or resources.

• **Public Policy and Advocacy:** ANC experienced much success in its public policy efforts over time. Some efforts heightened awareness of children and youth who were awaiting adoption; other efforts involved rights of adult adoptees to access their medical records. Legislators indicated that the organization’s advocacy efforts had educated them and promoted their understanding of the value of adoption. Strategies such as delivering messages to legislators through dolls representing children and youth awaiting adoption placement (Broussard, 2005) were powerful reminders.

• **Social Marketing Campaign:** The multimedia campaign was initiated in 2006 and included several messages targeting potential adoptive families for older youth. Adults were shown with teens; an older couple appeared with an adolescent girl. A single adult was shown with a teenager. These materials were depicted in brochures, tear-off posters, bus advertisements, and other media. Calls to the navigator phone line increased significantly during the media campaign, with 500 new inquiries regarding adoption by the campaign’s second year. Respondents to key informant surveys reported their awareness of marketing materials and the messages about adoption. The combined universal education and targeted marketing campaign was costly and the strategies were not repeated. Materials were in public view for about 15 months and the cost was $365,500. However, the campaign resulted in additional media attention to adoption and contributed to the success of advocacy efforts.

• **Adoption Navigators:** The navigators assisted 1,431 individuals in the project’s first three years. They became valued allies in county staff efforts to expedite home studies, match children and families, and promote adoption. Challenges they faced including building and sustaining trust with CCDHFS staff. Staff indicated that their work was, for the most part, not associated with the oldest children in the cohort.

• **Post-adoptive Family Supports:** A needs assessment was conducted among families that had already adopted one or more children. The results of the survey indicated that there were needs for emotional support, assistance with youth behavioral problems, support in navigating adolescence, and support in dealing with youth responses to childhood trauma. Adoptive families clearly articulated their need for assistance with youth whom they had adopted. Training for mental health professionals was implemented in the project’s final year. It included resources for supporting families as indicated above, along with building a clear understanding of adoption.

• **Business Outreach and Education:** This intervention did not achieve successes using the strategies that had been planned. However, outreach by members of the board of directors at Adoption Network Cleveland to their corporate and business associates had very positive results. Volunteers were recruited through these businesses to participate in the Digital Me project that was a component of Camp CONNECT. Through
their short-term connection to the project, more than 30 young adult professionals learned about older youth awaiting adoption and increased their understanding of adoption.

**Discussion**

In Adopt Cuyahoga’s Kids, child-centered recruitment made a difference for the oldest children in the cohort. When staff members had the flexibility to work with a small number of youth and were supported in that process, they were able to focus on the youth and seek caring adults to become family for that child. The elements of child-centered recruitment—getting to know the youth, collecting information about people in the youth’s past, using that information to identify supports and resources, and bringing adults and youth together—combined to achieve adoptive placements. Several of the project’s other interventions were helpful to staff or created a climate that supported the focus on older youth, although they did not show statistical significance. Camp CONNECT contributed powerful and positive messages to many of its attendees and Get Real provided opportunities for peer support. The Learning Community, although not universally supported, was essential in these efforts, especially in the initial years of the projects.

Legislators and community stakeholders interviewed for this project indicated that the media campaign and public policy/advocacy platform increased awareness of adoption throughout the community and influenced the course of adoption legislation in the state. Advocacy efforts and the campaign helped to change the context in which the future of youth in the care of public child welfare agencies is discussed. It is no longer considered a given that a youth in permanent custody of the public child welfare agency will remain there until young adulthood. Each partner agency and the dedicated unit at CCDCFS demonstrated the possibilities for achieving permanency and increased the likelihood of influencing practice.

**Implications for Practice**

The success of child-centered recruitment strategies that focus on developing or securing adoption placement resources for specific youth is significant for this project. However, youth also were placed with adoptive families using traditional child welfare practice where potential adoptive families are recruited, trained, and then matched without consideration for a specific child. It is possible that no one intervention or single group of intervention strategies can assure a path to permanency through adoption. Instead, staff working with older children and youth in the child welfare system must be flexible and creative, willing to adopt promising practices, include the voices of youth, and, above all, value the role of permanence in a youth’s life.

Today, Adoption Network Cleveland retains several of the interventions used in this project. Adoption navigators continue to assist families to pursue interest in adoption. Mentoring relationships are developed and supported. Teens attend the Get Real peer support sessions two to three times a month and can participate in pre-adoption preparation meetings now called Family Ties. ANC continues to use the Digital Me video project from Camp CONNECT for recruitment, finding it a powerful tool to introduce prospective adoptive parents to youth. A robust program of post-adoption services is available to any adoptive family. Business outreach and education continues with recent success in increasing adoption awareness and understanding, along with securing in-kind resources for youth and for Adoption Network Cleveland. CCDCFS has maintained its dedicated child-centered recruitment unit and kept contracts with some private partner agencies until recently. However, reduced financial resources have curtailed those contracts and lessened the efficacy of the recruitment unit.
Implications for Policy

Adoption Network Cleveland, lead agency for Adopt Cuyahoga’s Kids, demonstrated through its policy and advocacy platforms that it could become an influential player. First, the organization involved its volunteers fully in the process. As stakeholders, they helped to set and support the policy agenda. Then, through its staff participation and leadership role in an existing coalition, as well as work with other statewide groups, it was able to blend the organization’s agenda with that of the coalition and other partners. Relationship building and identifying legislators with a connection to adoption were vital components in this success story. ANC used a policy-consulting firm to gain access to legislators and to build staff and volunteer confidence and credibility. Consultants helped advocates articulate a clear and single message about the value of adoption. That message made a difference: it garnered media and public support and produced positive change for foster care alumni who might seek to be adopted and for adult adoptees. Consultants helped to craft the tasks in this advocacy and legislative process carefully. The use of deliberate, purposeful strategies, such as attending to the tasks of advocacy, building coalitions, and involving volunteers, along with the positive result of initial legislative successes, demonstrate that change can occur in this very public realm.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the Community Vision Council, Strong Families=Successful Children, the Cuyahoga County Board of Commissioners and the Department of Children and Family Services, United Way of Greater Cleveland, the federal Children’s Bureau, and the many community funders who have supported Adopt Cuyahoga’s Kids and Project CONNECT.

References


American Humane Association’s mission is to create a more humane and compassionate world by ending abuse and neglect of children and animals.