

## The Central Role of Permanence in Improving Outcomes for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

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*I didn't realize how much I needed a father until I became a dad.<sup>1</sup>*

A clear understanding of the meaning of permanence for older youth in foster care too often evades child welfare researchers, just as strong, nurturing, and enduring family connections too often evade youth aging out of care. Of the triad of goals for children and youth in foster care—safety, well-being, and permanency—the first two are the most researched and measured especially for youth aging out of foster care. Though far less subject to evidence gathering, a youth's need for and drive toward permanence and the pivotal role of permanence in improving adult outcomes is increasingly apparent.

### Cause for Concern

Years of experience and follow-up studies highlight concerns about emancipating youth. Studies show youth aging out face steep challenges to establishing themselves in careers, families, and communities. Such landmark research as Festinger's *No One Ever Asked Us* (1984) and Fanshel, Finch, and Grundy's *Foster Children in Life Course Perspective* (1990), as well as more recent research on youth aging out, identify the negatives: increased likelihood of homelessness, lower educational and employment achievement, greater reliance on income supports, early parenting, and increased legal and psychiatric problems (e.g., Courtney, et al., 2007). New studies from the states are adding to these compelling depictions (Children's Bureau, 2008).

Recognizing these challenges, the landmark Chafee law (Title I of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999) allocated additional resources for life skills preparation and transitional programming such as life skills classes, transitional housing, and job site mentoring. The law provided professional services to promote safety and well-being for emancipating youth.

Two problems surfaced early even in well-intentioned Independent Living (IL) programs. First, IL resources are too often unused. Evaluations of Chafee identified states' underutilization was a major problem, with states failing to tap available resources and youth declining them (Kerman, Wildfire & Barth, 2004). Second, many programs are not effective enough (GAO, 1999, 2004 & 2007). Courtney (2008a, 2008b) reviewed two recent attempts to create mentoring relationships and teach skills in a classroom setting. They didn't succeed in large part, he suggests, because efforts failed to solidify and integrate benefits inherent in ongoing parenting relationships. Indeed, a recent review of IL research laments the dearth of programs with demonstrated results and points to the promise of integrating life skills and permanence work (Clark & Crosland, in press/2009).

The journey toward permanence provides a focus for . . . improving outcomes for children and families.

Research suggests many youth exiting foster care have a need unforeseen in Chafee: enduring, supportive relationships. Likewise, evidence is beginning to show the need to integrate individual development with family support. For instance, The Jim Casey Youth Opportunity Initiatives' (2008) efforts to assist youth develop basic financial skills are most successful when youth report having supportive family connections. Likewise, research on the transition to adulthood shows that material and relational supports from family are often crucial to a youth's success well into his or her twenties, and that's for youth *not* involved in the child welfare system (Schoeni & Ross, 2004).

### Understanding Permanence

Life skills are no substitute for family connections. While services that improve family relationships may be key to better IL, family connections that increase residential stability, deepen emotional

security, and cement family bonds may be solutions more likely to go the distance, short circuit reentry, and result in better adult outcomes. At the same time, shortcomings in conceptual clarity and the current research base cloud our understanding of how permanence, safety, and well-being are related.

Studies of adoption, reunification, and guardianship show benefits *and* challenges to youth development. Moving children out of foster care and into families can accomplish several laudable goals though it may not universally improve safety or well-being. Indeed, head-to-head comparisons of outcome measures for reunified or adopted children with those in high quality foster care are often ambiguous due to design and measurement limitations. For instance, studies seldom include direct measures of family connection quality and

never randomly assign permanency type. Studies pitting permanence outcomes for children in long term foster care against those who were adopted often favor the adoptees (Trisiolitis, 2002) though none can fully rule out preexisting differences among the youth. Elsewhere, well-being and self-sufficiency outcomes for children who were adopted have been found to be similar to those who received extended foster care and high quality family supports (Kerman, Barth, & Wildfire, 2002). More recently, Kessler et al. (2008) revealed the successes of foster care rich in ancillary and family supports. Additional longitudinal research may help elucidate the interrelationships among these valued outcomes.

However, no single metric can strike the perfect balance among safety, well-being, and permanence. For instance, reunification is a valued outcome that can minimize state intrusion and consolidate cultural identity. But it may also prolong struggles for youth whose parents, for want of resources or abilities, can't help youth achieve goals such as completing high school, graduating college, and working. Similarly, adoption can bring

1 The Annie E. Casey Foundation/Casey Family Services & Casey Family Programs 2008, p. 21.

long-lasting relationships and resources, but often means a break with parents, extended family, and racial, ethnic, and language heritage.

### Placing Permanency at the Center

Research describing poor outcomes for youth aging out suggests an alternative: sustained, intense attention to relationships en route to permanence. What if child welfare systems understood that relationships are key to permanence; what if they did everything within their power to identify and build those relationships? The type of permanence outcome reached for any given youth is important but so are two related considerations.

First, are youth and their families fully involved in decisions to expand resources, build connections, and solidify emotional permanence? Second, does the permanence plan have a fighting chance and include any needed supports for the youth and family? The search for permanence, including a reliable, lifelong parenting relationship and the opportunity to maintain contact with family and other important people, is described by youth and foster alumni as a core need to be balanced with the simultaneous need for independence (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Much of adult resilience results from continuous relationships, tolerance of limit testing, and a sense that family will “be there no matter what.” Family is critical for psychological development, as both mediator and source of challenging experiences and resources for successful navigation of adulthood. In this sense, the pursuit of enduring relationships, alongside support services, provides a framework for permanency oriented child welfare services, and the journey toward permanence provides a focus for improving outcomes for children and families.

### Leaping Forward

For researchers, this framework presents real challenges. Relationships, emotional security, and permanence are not easy to measure or describe, but strategies for reaching each can be piloted and tested. For example, a variety of model programs use family teaming to involve youth and families (e.g., Permanency Teaming, Team Decision Making, Family Group Decision Making). Co-investment strategies, such

as partnerships between child welfare systems and the courts, also offer promise. One example is the courts’ success in using mediation to speed adjudication and permanence, reduce placement length, and increase kin permanency outcomes (Gatowski, Dobbin, Litchfield & Oetjen, 2005). Policy changes now in process offer several opportunities for testing permanence as a framework for organizing child welfare services and prioritizing relationship building.

The child welfare system makes a poor parent. With the current economic woes stressing our safety net, states make for even poorer parents.

### Law and Policy

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 provides several tools for prioritizing family connections. The bill gives states the option of extending financial supports to kin providers and older youth. It includes new mandates for notifying kin, analyzing the use of kin foster care, and explaining foster care benefits and requirements to kin. It requires siblings to be placed together whenever possible and that, when separated, sibling connections be supported.

### Practice Enhancements

Fostering Connections will similarly change child welfare practice by requiring more family finding and notification. Through new, admittedly small Family Connections grants, it will support testing

and evaluation of kinship navigator programs, family finding programs, family involvement meetings, and parent/child residential treatment programs. The act mandates transition planning meetings 90 days prior to youth aging out (unfortunately failing to articulate the need to support family relationship building). Another spur to practice innovation are the federal Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSR), which track states’ performance involving families and achieving permanency (for more on CFSRs and family involvement strategies, see Munson & Freundlich, 2008).

If child welfare systems make a poor parent even in good times, the current economic woes stressing our safety net make for even poorer parents. As we examine child welfare programs with a critical eye in search of program improvement and cost reduction, it’s time to focus on results and use permanence as a driver for better child outcomes.

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