



KEEPING THE FAMILY CONVERSATION ALIVE



What Caregivers, Child Welfare Professionals and Other Caring Adults Can Do:

- Practice thinking ahead by asking, “what does permanence mean to you?” Who would you want to attend your graduation? To walk you down the aisle? To visit during the holidays? To reach out to if you needed a loan? Practice asking, “How will you feel at 32 when you don’t have permanent family?”
- Provide room for a change of heart. Recognize that young people who have been hurt in the past may not feel emotionally safe to invest in the possibility of a forever home the first, second or third time this topic is brought to them. Adolescent’s brains are urging them to be independent; remember this when talking about permanency with them.
- It’s normal for adolescents to exercise autonomy. Initially, they may think this means exiting foster care to independence, but many will later want and need the support of family. Keep the conversation about legal permanence ALIVE even into adulthood.
- Be mindful of goal changes that prematurely shut the door on permanence. Young people often take cues from the attitudes of and efforts made by adults when it comes to pursuing legal permanence. Social work teams should analyze reasons for goal changes that do not support legal permanence.
- Knowing that many older youth return to their family of origin upon exiting foster care, proactively support biological families and strengthen their abilities to reunify with their adolescent or adult children.
- Learning how to make important decisions is a muscle that needs to be exercised and supported in court. Engage, prepare and support older youth before, during and after meetings and court hearings. Talk through what will happen, what decisions will be made and who will be there. Prepare young people to effectively participate and ask questions.
- For youth of color who are disproportionately represented in both the child welfare and criminal justice systems, court may represent an institution of perceived or real violation, oppression or disenfranchisement. Acknowledge and address how significant this fear is and how this fear may affect the expectations they have for themselves and from the child welfare system.
- Adolescents and emerging adults rely heavily on the emotional center of the brain for decision making. It is helpful to communicate and process through this emotional lens. For example, “How is this making you feel right now?” “I know this might be making you feel trapped/rejected/mad, so let’s figure out how to address that first.” Keep in mind that this conversation can be held outside of a therapy appointment with a caring adult.
- Understand what is behind the ‘no’ when a young person seems to resist being connected to a family. Do they fear adoption because they will lose connection to their brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles? Are they convinced that their race, culture, religion and sexual and gender identity will be honored? Keep talking about it, and try to understand and validate the legitimate fears they may have while discussing ways to overcome them. Healthy, permanent and interdependent relationships support a young person’s successful adulthood.

Disruptions and disappointments in foster care can pave a negative path.



DID YOU KNOW?

Federal policy supports making finding families a priority for older youth, and some states even require caseworkers to keep trying when young people are reluctant. Check out the Child Welfare Information Gateway at childwelfare.gov to learn more about your state’s policies and other resources.

Most young people have a strong connection to an adult, but **more than 23,000** exit foster care without legal permanence each year.

Learn more by downloading the full paper, *The Road to Adulthood: Aligning Child Welfare Practice With Adolescent Brain Development*, at www.aecf.org/resources/the-road-to-adulthood.

35% of young people 14 years and older who have experienced foster care leave the system without legal permanency. These young people are more likely to be African American or Latino.

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative works to ensure young people are connected to family and community by preventing them from exiting foster care without a permanent family.

Being legally connected to a permanent family is central to a young person's well-being and sense of belonging. **Cultivating permanent families for young people starts by understanding key aspects of development:**

- Young people and their rock-solid adult connections work together to help the young person move from dependence to being interdependent with others, sharing responsibility and authority
- All adolescents learn by exercising autonomy and taking risks
- Young people are gradually shifting from making decisions based on emotion and impulse to making decisions based on critical thinking and planning
- Adolescent brains are constantly learning and changing depending on their environment and can benefit from positive memories of family to help them cope with living in foster care. All young people, and particularly youth of color who may have been separated from their communities, rely on family members to provide cultural context to their lives and brain development
- They are highly attuned to social cues and the emotions of others, but can easily misinterpret those cues
- The way young people communicate is influenced by culture. Some cultures, such as Hispanic and Asian cultures, rely less on verbal communication and more on shared experiences, nonverbal cues and implicit messages

Young people who are in foster care have often experienced attachment disruptions, trauma and adversity. These early experiences profoundly affect the way young people perceive relationships, permanence and trust. Not only is it normal for all adolescents and young adults to crave independence, but for those who have experienced trauma, moving multiple times, letdowns and dashed expectations for a family, a young person may want to focus on independence to avoid getting hurt again.

Even though acting on emotion, being impulsive and taking risks is normal behavior for all adolescents, adults often respond to young people in foster care with restrictions and punishment. Such responses can ultimately jeopardize a young person's stability and permanence.

These disruptions and disappointments can create a difficult path for older youth on the quest for a permanent family.

Caregivers and teachers may see resistance and normal risk taking as defiance, and may disengage instead of investing in an enduring relationship at this critical point.

Child welfare professionals such as caseworkers and judges might hear what the young person says and, believing they are honoring their wishes, may abandon the quest for a family, too.

The stakes are too high to give up on finding a permanent family, no matter how old a young person is or how difficult their history in foster care. Research makes clear that caring adults make a huge difference at every age. Families can be blood relatives or chosen. Consider the importance of kinship and extended families. Studies have shown these families to be more stable than non-kinship families for African-American youth because they may be more likely to understand young people's developmental needs within their cultural context. Young people who leave foster care without families are more likely to experience homelessness, under-employment, early pregnancy, contact with the criminal justice system or substance use.



The longer young people stay in foster care, the less likely they are to be reunified with their birth families, be adopted or find another permanent living situation.



REDIRECTING THE PATH:

Transforming Conversations about Family

When a young person says:

I am sick of this house. I would just rather do this on my own. **I've been raising myself for years anyway.**

Instead of responding this way:

Fine; I'm done trying. She tells me she doesn't want another family, so **I'm taking her at her word.**

The young person may mean:

I'm terrified of being rejected again. **I'd rather leave before anyone kicks me out.**

Caring adults can say:

I can imagine how risky it would feel to depend on a family after having to be so independent. I wonder what we can do to work towards being able to depend on each other in the future? I am here for support, to call and to lean on. **We're all dependent on each other and never stop needing each other.**

Or:

Will being adopted by this family mean **never seeing my brother again?** Giving up on my mom? Will I feel like I don't really belong?

Or:

I wonder if we can think about who you are already connected to and how to maintain those relationships? When something exciting happens in your life, who do you want to tell? **Who do you want to make sure you keep in touch with?**

Every interaction with a young person matters. **Make yours count!**

This is just one example of what a young person in foster care might say about finding a family — and what they might really be thinking. You can respond in a way that keeps the conversation going and wires the adolescent brain for trust, possibility and healthy interdependence with others.

Even moments that might seem like conflict are opportunity moments. Have your own conversations with a young person.