



National Resource Center for Youth Development

The University of Oklahoma OUTREACH | A service of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau

NRCYD UPDATE

Summer 2004



Permanency for Adolescents

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Successful Adolescent Adoptions

by Cynthia Flynn, PhD, Center for Child and Family Studies University of South Carolina

Forty-nine families who adopted youth between the ages of 12 and 19 shared stories of their successful adoptions with researchers at The Center for Child and Family Studies in the College of Social Work at the University of South Carolina. These families, from 18 states, described their definitions of success, the factors that made their adoptions successful, and the process they went through in deciding to adopt. Thirty-seven teens from 30 of the families were also interviewed as part of the study. They shared their stories about the adoption process and how they came to accept the decision to be adopted.

What is success?

According to adoptive parents and adoptees in this study, success is partly defined as staying together – finalizing the adoption and continuing it through adulthood without dissolving it. “It is successful because he’s still here. While he has rebelled, he has not left,” one couple said about their 17-year-old son who was adopted four years ago. In separate interviews, parents were asked to describe why they thought their adoptions were successful and adoptees were asked to rate their adoptions on a scale from one (awful) to ten (great) and explain their ratings. Both described success in terms of the family relationship. Adoptees talked about success in terms of feeling more normal.

Functioning and feeling like a family was critical for both parents and adoptees in this study. One couple said, “I feel good that they feel the love that we have for them and they feel a part of something, of a family, whereas they didn’t before.” “A number ten all the way because everything I ever wanted from a family, I got. Love, comfort, warmth, whenever I need somebody, I got my mom,” said an adoptee.

Several adoptees summarized their feelings about the success of the adoption by describing their lives as more normal, more like their peers who live with birth parents. One adoptee spoke for many in saying, “I would give it a ten because I have a normal life now.” She went on to define normal: “I have a driver’s license, and I drive. I have friends, and I get to go on overnights. There is no comparison between what my life is now and what it was before.”

Some parents in this study described success in terms of favorable outcomes. “We gave her a place to launch into adulthood. She graduated from high school and was the first to do

so from her biological family on both sides. She got married before she got pregnant and is still married ten years later.”

Many of the adoptive parents and adoptees said they went into the adoption with realistic expectations. Adoptees did not expect to find the ideal family and parents did not expect to find the ideal children. They expected that the adoption would work, but it would not be perfect. “You accept what you get and do the best you can,” said one father who adopted a brother and sister. Another father explained, “My expectations were nonexistent. I wanted to see what his potential was.” “I do still have some issues, and my mother doesn’t always get along with me,” said one young woman adopted at age 18. “But that’s pretty typical,” she went on to say. Recognizing that the adoption would not be perfect helped parents and adoptees appreciate the good aspects of adoption and put the difficult aspects in perspective.

What helped make the adoption successful?

“It worked because my Mom is not a nut bag,” said one adoptee when asked why the adoption worked. “Just pure dumb luck,” said an adoptive parent. Others were more specific about what made the adoption successful. Determination, perseverance, and commitment were terms frequently used by both adoptive parents and adoptees to explain why their adoptions worked. “We worked together. We went to counseling. We never gave up,” said one young woman adopted at 14. “She [adoptee] was determined and worked with us to make it successful,” said a parent who had also adopted a 14 year old. Another parent explained, “I think being willing to hang in there during the difficult times is what made it successful.” “It worked because of my parents’ perseverance and understanding of me. I know I didn’t make it easy for them,” commented another adoptee.

Other adoptees and their parents talked about personality traits they saw as key to a successful adoption. Flexibility, a sense of humor, and good communication skills were mentioned most frequently by parents in this study. Adoptees talked about having a positive attitude. “I went into it with an open mind. I chose not to be rebellious because there is no purpose in it. I am pretty easygoing and I want to do things right,” said an adoptee.

Getting support when it was needed was also critical for many parents and adoptees in this study. For parents, the support came from extended family, friends, and professionals. “I think the biggest thing that helped us keep her in our home as long as we did was the counselor,” said a parent of a particularly difficult teen. “The counselor helped us with anger management, helping us understand why she did certain

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behaviors, and teaching us behavior modification to deal with them,” she added. A few parents talked about faith in God. “God helped us through everything and made us hang in there,” said one mother. Adoptees talked about the support provided by their parents. One teen said, “My dad is very laid back and doesn’t yell, and that was what I needed. I need him for support.”

The commitment of both teens and their parents to make the adoption work plays a major role in achieving success. Like most birth families, they did not give up on one another but kept on working on their special issues and challenges.

How do parents make the decision to adopt?

There is no simple answer as to how parents decide to adopt. Based on interviews with parents in this study, it is clear that the decision to adopt is a process, not an event. In fact, 41% of the parents in this study had had no plans to adopt.

The other 59% were either actively searching for a child or passively open to the prospect of adoption. They identified four reasons for wanting to adopt: infertility issues, empty nest syndrome, single but wanted children, or always wanted to adopt. “Adoption was something that I always wanted to do,” said one mother. “We took the kids they found for us.”

People with no plans to adopt came to their decision to adopt because they found a specific child in need of a home and they decided to adopt that child. In this study, parents not planning to adopt came in contact with the children they later adopted through volunteer activities, chance encounters, or foster parenting. One study participant met his future son while volunteering as a mentor. The father explained that the agency decided to move this child to another placement, “That is when I stepped up and asked about [my] adopting him.”

Those who first served as foster parents without the initial interest in adopting said they decided to adopt because someone asked them

to adopt the child, they became attached to the child, or they wanted to provide some stability and support for the child. As one mother said, “You get kind of tired of children coming in and out because you get attached. So, I decided to adopt.”

Half of the people in this study were pragmatic when it came to choosing a child for adoption. These parents talked about providing a home, finding a good match, or providing opportunities. Some of these parents established specific criteria about the type of child that would fit in their home, while others were willing to take most any child. One parent’s story is typical of this group in terms of her willingness to accept any child needing a home. “There’s a lot of those children out there that need a home and want somewhere to stay. I put in to adopt for one, they asked me would I try the pack [6]. I thought if I take them, they will have somewhere, when I’m gone, they’ll have somewhere they can call home.”

The other half of people in this study said emotions were the leading factor in choosing a child for adoption. These parents talked about making a connection, clicking with the child, and experiencing love at first sight. For these people, the more practical decisions about age, gender, and race appeared less important. Even those who planned to adopt younger children were willing to adjust because they connected in some way with older children. Emotional connections were especially important for those people who had had no plans to adopt.

This study shows that there are a wide variety of people who are willing to adopt. With so many children in need of adoption, traditional methods of recruiting for families may need to be expanded to fully capture all those who may be willing to adopt.

How do adolescents influence the adoption decision?

The role of adolescents in the adoption decision-making process is complex. As minors, they are not in full control

of the decision to be adopted. The actual legal decisions about adoption are ultimately left up to the adults. Adolescents’ roles and the amount of influence they have in the process are shaped by their own personalities, agency policies, caseworker attitudes, and prospective parents.

Some adoptees were assertive in sharing their opinions about adoption. “I told them that I would be interested in being their son if they asked me,” said one young man. Others were more tentative and were willing to go along with whatever was presented to them. “I had no choice,” said one adoptee. “I knew I didn’t want to be alone. I didn’t really care at that point. It was not someone I would have chosen.” Others voiced their opinions when asked. “My foster parents brought it up initially. We talked about it a little bit, and of course, at that time, I was just looking for a family. So everything was just fine with me, really.” It appears that parents and caseworkers listened to adoptees, especially when they said they wanted to be adopted.

Most adoption agencies allow some level of involvement by adolescents in the adoption process. The visitation and placement period prior to adoption finalization allows adoptees and the adoptive family an opportunity to get to know one another before the actual adoption takes place. Together, they decide if the adoption is right for them. One adoptee said, “I figured out that I wanted to be adopted during the six-month period that I lived with him. I felt that I have found a match for myself.” When there is no visitation or placement period, as is common with international adoptions, adoptees have less opportunity for involvement in decision making. “I started to get a little scared and I wasn’t sure if I really wanted to come because I was happy down there [Caribbean nation],” said one international adoptee. “I didn’t think I wanted to come but they pretty much made me come.”

The actions of the caseworkers promoted or inhibited the teens’ role in
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the adoption process. One teen liked the way his caseworker approached him about adoption. “He kind of asked me what it would be like if I could describe my perfect family. After I gave him a description, he said that he would try to find one for me.” Some caseworkers allowed the teens to have control over the timing of the adoption. “It was a good thing for me that they didn’t pressure me,” said one teen. “I usually rebel when someone tries to push me.” A few caseworkers allowed the teen to make the decision about the adoption finalization. “When she came to live with me, her social worker told her that he would find another place if she didn’t like it here,” one adoptive mother reported.

Prospective parents also shaped the role of the adoptee in the adoption process. Some parents allowed the teen to decide whether to be adopted: “I gave her the choice and said it was up to her.” Others let the teen control the timing of the adoption finalization. “I left it up to him to make a decision about finalizing the adoption. He picked the day and he looked forward to it,” said one father. At the other end of the continuum, some parents reported that they made the decision to adopt the teen before they met: “I decided in my own mind that whoever it is, I would have to decide to adopt this child before I ever physically met it.”

Summary

“I think adopting teenagers is important, and it is doable,” said one mother who adopted a 13 year old. “There have been hard times and sacrifices but I don’t see them as sacrifices, more as choices,” said a single father who adopted a 14 year old. “I’d rather be helping him than whatever it is I used to do.” These parents aptly summarize the findings from this study. Adolescent adoptions can be difficult, but not only are they possible, they can also be rewarding for families as well as for society. 🌟

Key Recommendations

A review of the literature and findings from this study reveal that many current adoption practices need to be improved. These improvements would help to make adolescent adoptions more possible and more adolescent adoptions successful. Some key recommendations suggested in the Successful Adolescent Adoptions research study are listed below.

- Include recruitment strategies that offer opportunities for adults in the community to get to know teens in foster care.
- Employ caseworkers specifically for adolescent adoptions who have positive attitudes about teen adoptions and who are eager to find homes for adolescents. Streamline the process as much as possible so that the teens can be adopted when they are ready.
- Prepare adolescents individually for the adoption process by doing six key steps:
 - 1) explain their legal status
 - 2) offer adoption as a viable option for permanence,
 - 3) offer support and information as they consider adoption,
 - 4) explain how the adoption process will proceed,
 - 5) assess each adolescent to determine their level of adjustment regarding birth family issues, and
 - 6) provide support as needed to help them deal with these birth family issues appropriately.
- Allow parents and adolescents to have adequate visitation prior to the adoption.
- Agencies need to provide ongoing support for parents and teens and make sure that families are aware of these services and how to access them. Parents need to access these services in a timely manner rather than trying to make it through without assistance.

Advice for those Considering Adoption

There is an enormous amount of good advice from parents and adoptees concerning teen adoption. Although the parents were more prolific with their advice, the adoptees also shared some important information. Many of their thoughts echoed those of their parents.

Get to Know Each Other. People considering adoption — both parents and children — should get to know as much about one another as possible before agreeing to the adoption. Adoptees advised teens to feel comfortable with the family before making the commitment. Parents advised prospective parents to learn as much as possible about the child’s background so that better preparations could be made to work with him or her.

Make the Right Decision. Although they used some different words, both parents and adoptees advised those considering adoption to make the right decision for themselves. Both recommended considering all of the possibilities before agreeing to the adoption. The adoptees said that kids should not let themselves feel pressured and that families should fully consider the impact on their lives.

Work Together. Both parents and adoptees thought the adoption goes more smoothly when both parties work together. Adoptees urged adolescents to be easygoing and try to get along with their new families. Parents recommended that parents use their sense of humor and be flexible.

Do It! Ultimately, both parents and adoptees said that adoption is worthwhile and that, despite the difficulties, they highly recommend it. The parents described it as a great adventure that changes the lives of all involved. The adoptees opinion ranged from adoption was much better than being in the system to it is the greatest thing in the world.

CSR/Massachusetts Families for Kids-Lifelong Family Connections: An Adolescent Permanency Model

By Mary LeBeau and Kim Stevens

The Lifelong Family Connections Project

Lifelong Family Connections prevents youth from aging out of the foster care system without a significant family connection in their life. Research and practice have demonstrated that practitioners must address adolescents' needs for both independent living skills and permanent family relationships if they are to leave the foster care system and become successful adults.

This statewide project focuses on establishing lifelong family connections for adolescents in foster/residential care in Massachusetts. The services are provided to teens who are between the ages of 14 and 18 no matter what their DSS service plan goal is (adoption, guardianship, long-term substitute care, or independent living). This project also targets youth within this age range who have an adoption or guardianship goal but for whom traditional recruitment methods have not produced a permanent family.

The project combines seven innovative youth centered, family focused program components to assist in identifying, establishing, and sustaining lifelong family relationships on behalf of these adolescents. The primary goal is to establish meaningful and permanent connections to significant adults while simultaneously identifying placements for the teens whenever possible. In every case, the focus is on

developing a connection that provides the highest level of physical, emotional, and legal permanency within the context of a family relationship. The seven components are :

1. The foundational approach is the use of Community of Care Reviews which focus on developing the youth's understanding of the need for permanence and fully exploring the adolescent's past and present network of personal connections, both relative and non

relative, identifying individuals and family members who might be able to provide a permanent lifelong relationship.

2. The second primary approach features the Family Consultation Team (FCT) developed and piloted by Massachusetts Families for Kids. It promotes youth-centered permanency planning among families, social service agencies and service providers. The FCT © is the case planning team identified and brought together through the Community of Care Review. The youth is "in the drivers seat" to identify potential team members and participates fully in the planning process. A foundational principle of the FCT model is concurrent

planning where multiple placement options are pursued simultaneously. FCT explores preferred permanent placement options while simultaneously developing supportive, permanent connections with family and other important adults in the teens' lives. The outcome is a Youth-Specific Permanency Plan, a written document that defines the teen's needs for safety, support, continuity of relationships and permanence. FCT meetings continue to monitor progress toward the permanency goal and act as a support for the family and the teen as they move toward the most legally, emotionally, and physically secure relationship possible.

3. Youth are offered the opportunity to participate in an adaptation of Family Bound©, (Lewis and Heffernan) a psycho-educational/experiential training program. The curriculum helps prepare adolescents for permanent family life as well as providing them with skills for communicating their needs, negotiating, and setting personal goals.

4. The project also undertakes specialized adolescent recruitment to identify permanent placements and/or family connection resources for youth who have no viable adult connections in their network. This recruitment effort takes into account the teen's strengths, interests, talents, and career goals, and creates connections
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tions from these areas that have a natural link to the teen.

5. The project includes the use of a specialized training for individuals considering becoming permanent resources for youth adapted from the P.A.T.H. © curriculum developed by the National Resource Center for Special Needs Adoption.

This training assists adults in understanding and responding to the special needs of youth who have experienced multiple moves, trauma, and broken relationships.

6. The MFFK Speak Out Team provides advocacy, mentoring and peer support for adolescents involved in the LFC program.

The Speak Out Team comprises teens and young adults, ages 12-35, who are adopted and/or have experienced the foster care system. They provide a youth's perspective of the child welfare system and work to further the issue of youth permanence with practitioners and policy makers. In becoming an advocate for system change, many youth find strengths and talents that had been untapped. Additionally, the support of peers who have had similar experiences provides a safe community in which to belong and from which to grow.

7. Specialized Post Permanency Supports: Customized and comprehensive supports are developed through a collaboration of formal, informal and community resources.

Essential post permanency services are available in collaboration with the regional Adoption Crossroads post permanency support program for adoptive, guardian and kinship families. This specialized state-funded program provides in-home interventions, information/referral, therapists and other collaterals, parent and youth support groups, and respite services. In some cases, MFFK Voucher services provide flexible funds to remove barriers to achieving permanency/place-

ment. MFFK has successfully used this multi-component approach in meeting the permanence needs of adolescents since its initial twelve-month pilot program began in February 2000. Twenty-four adolescents were served and permanent connections were identified from the youths' existing networks for all but seven of the referred teens. Specialized recruitment was successful for those seven. The majority of the adolescents was eager to engage and motivated to work on developing a permanent family relationship. Adolescents were identified and referred at a greater rate than the project could accommodate. Since March 2003, Lifelong Family Connection services have been available, in three program sites, under a state contract. This contract has seen twenty-six youth referred of whom nineteen engaged in the LFC process. Currently seven youth have identified family connections, nine are exploring prospective connections, and three may need specialized recruitment. A Federal Adoption Opportunities Grant, awarded in fall 2003, has made LFC a statewide program which is now in the referral stage.

The success of LFC is founded on the collaboration of all involved parties and their commitment to a youth-driven process. Willingness to work as a team, with a solution-focused approach, ensures the development of a comprehensive, youth-centered permanent plan. In this model youth are seen as central actors in their own futures and are fully incorporated in the planning process. The model is respectful of the unique developmental stage of adolescence—transitioning from childhood to adulthood. Clearly, adolescents are best prepared to transition to adulthood when they have at least one caring, committed adult in their lives.

“I know that I'm usually mean to you guys, and I make life really hard for you, but I just want you to know that I really appreciate what you are trying to do for me.”

— Judy, 16 1/2

Judy, 16 1/2:

Judy has been in residential placements of various levels and intensities for several years. She has been cut off from family and experienced repeated restraints and disciplinary consequences because of “oppositional” behavior. Since Judy has been involved in the program, her grandmother and aunts have been located, her baby pictures and other family pictures have been given to her, and letter writing has begun. On the way home from an intake meeting at a new group home, Judy said to her DSS case worker and LFC specialist, “I know that I'm usually mean to you guys, and I make life really hard for you, but I just want you to know that I really appreciate what you are trying to do for me.”

“I just want someone who will be in the audience for me when I do something big.”

— Kevin, 21

Kevin, 21:

Kevin is enrolled in a prestigious university and moving toward a successful music career, but had had no real family connection in his life — he told his worker, “I just want someone who will be in the audience for me when

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I do something big.” Recently, Kevin joined the MFFK team for a multi-day training in Connecticut. On the second morning, he came down from his room and said, “You won't believe what happened! Kathy (a recently identified/matched lifelong adult connection — formerly unknown to Kevin) called my room last night to ask me how things went. No one has ever done anything like that in my entire life. It felt so good — it made the whole thing worthwhile.”

“I know it's only because of you that I'm getting to see my family again. Thank you.”

— Sammy, 16

Sammy, 16:

Sammy is significantly developmentally challenged and has been in a locked unit for almost one year. About four or five months into the program, he had finally been able to have a visit with his maternal grandmother and uncle. Although he has a difficult time attending to task and/or subject matter, on the next meeting with his worker he stopped in the middle of a rambling conversation to say, “Thank you.” When asked what he was saying it for, Sammy said, “I know it's only because of you that I'm getting to see my family again. Thank you.”

Note: all names are changed

Other comments from youth:

“This is the first time anyone ever asked me what I want.”

“I can't believe a family really wants me!”

“I wish this was available to every kid in foster care.”

“I finally feel like someone cares about what happens to me.”

Upcoming Training & Conferences

Regional Training Schedule

Residential Child and Youth Care Professional Trainer Certification

September 14-16, 2004 | New Orleans – Prince Conti Hotel

Managing Aggressive Behavior Trainer Certification

August 2-6, 2004 | Tulsa – Hilton Southern Hills

October 4-8, 2004 | Tulsa – Hilton Southern Hills

Behavior Crisis Management Trainer Certification

November 1-4, 2004 | Tulsa – Hilton Southern Hills

For more information on Regional Training contact:
Rhoda Baker (918) 660-3700

National Conference Schedule

2004 National Adoption and Foster Care Recruitment Summit- “Answering the Call: Partnering With Communities of Faith”

Sponsored by **AdoptUSKids**

July 15-16, 2004 | Washington, D.C.

www.cwla.org/conferences/2004adoptUSKids.htm

National Youth Summit- “Youth Leadership in America's Communities”

Sponsored by **Family and Youth Services Bureau**

July 22-24, 2004 | Cleveland, OH – Renaissance Cleveland Hotel

www.ncfy.com/summit

Destination Future 2004 National Youth Leadership Conference- “Uniting the Voices of Youth”

Presented by **National Resource Center for Youth Services**

August 20-22, 2004 | Chevy Chase, MD – National 4H Youth Conference Center

www.nrcys.ou.edu/destinationfuture2004

9th International Conference on Family Violence Family Violence and Sexual Assault Institute

September 18-22, 2004 | San Diego, CA – Town & Country Hotel and Convention Center

www.fvsi.org



Merging Permanency and Independent Living: Lifelong Family Relationships and Life Skills for Older Youth

By Lauren Frey, MSW, LICSW, Project Manager,
The Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice

Nowhere is the need for a holistic approach to serving youth in the child welfare system more obvious than with our oldest youth in foster care. The current infrastructure of the system compartmentalizes work with youth according to a set of philosophies, policies and practices that offer *either* “legal family membership” (reunification, adoption, guardianship) *or* “long-term support” (another permanent planned living arrangement, or independent living). In other words, our oldest youth get to have one or the other — permanent families or life skills and long-term support — but not both. Although promising practices and progressive policies have emerged recently in both the field of independent living/transitional services and in the field of permanency services, this artificial compartmentalization continues to exist — and from “the eyes of a youth” it still doesn’t make much sense.

Rarely are the three dimensions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) — safety, permanency and well-being — *concurrently* prioritized for the oldest youth in foster care. Most of the oldest youth in care have either goals of “another planned permanent living arrangement” or “independent living,” meaning that their *safety* needs are largely being met through out-of-home placement and their *well-being* needs are largely being met through a host of educational, vocational, behavioral health, and life skills supports and services. But what about *permanency*?

The definition of permanency is clear in the literature and meant to be applied not only to younger children in the system, but to older youth as well. ***Permanency is not a process, a plan or a placement — permanency is a family relationship that is intended to last a lifetime.*** According to well-known pioneers in the field, permanency has long been defined as a family relationship that provides:

1. the intent to endure indefinitely,
2. commitment, continuity, and assumption of a common future,
3. a sense of belonging and emotional security, and
4. legal and social family status that protects a child’s or youth’s legal rights and interests and transcends the societal stigma of foster care.

Achieving a successful permanency outcome for any child or youth in the foster care system clearly begins with reunification. The most comprehensive and customized services must be garnered in order to support every child or youth growing up within his or her birth family if it is safe and secure. But when safety in the family of origin cannot be sustained, best practice standards should be applied no differently for older youth than they are for younger children – by implementing a concurrent plan for family membership in a kinship, adoptive, or guardian family with ongoing connectedness to birth family members, family culture, ethnicity, and language.

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Promising practices with older youth have raised the bar on child welfare permanency services to this population. Initiatives such as:

- Permanency for Teens (IA);
 - Families for Teens (Northeast OH);
 - Massachusetts Families for Kids' Lifelong Family Connections at Children's Services of Roxbury (MA);
 - Catholic Community Services of Western Washington (WA);
 - You Gotta Believe (NYC);
- and the recently-implemented Department of Children and Families' Lifelong Family Ties (CT) have all contributed to the emerging framework of principles that inform child welfare practice with older youth. These principles include:

- ***The need to be guided by a sound definition of permanency.*** It is imperative that the beginning of all policy, practice, and program change on behalf of older youth begin with a sound definition of permanency as described in permanency planning literature.
- ***The need to customize permanency outcomes.*** Because permanent family relationships were not pursued early enough or adequately enough for some older youth in care, permanency may look different for them now than it might have looked for them as younger children. Older youth often have a complex maze of relationships they may want to maintain, and we all know that older youth have some very definite opinions about what or who they now want in their lives. Consequently a very individualized approach is needed. Experience has taught us that when we are willing to be guided by the wisdom and wishes of youth regarding their own lives, we will be most successful in achieving permanent family relationships for them. The permanency goal for them must be to reach "the optimal degree of physical safety, emotional security and legal permanency that can be achieved within the context of a family relationship." And that "optimal

degree" might be reunification with a youth's family of origin; adoption or guardianship by a family known to him or her; adoption or guardianship by another family not yet known; or by a family relationship that does not include legal family membership but does include symbolic and meaningful rituals such as legal name change, being named in a parent's will, a commitment ceremony, etc.

- ***The need to do strategic casework with each youth.*** How often do we hear that an older youth said "no" to adoption? When we do, we must be willing to ask ourselves, just what that youth is saying? That he doesn't want to belong? That she doesn't want to be connected to anyone? That he doesn't want to care about anyone or need anyone to care about him? No, not at all. And we often see obvious proof of that in the youth's desperate search to find belonging anywhere she can and be cared about at almost any cost.

Youth who say "no" to adoption are saying that their fears and feelings are coming in the way of making sound decisions about their families and their futures. They are saying that they need adults in their lives to give them a reason to take another chance at "family" when things never worked well for them in the past. They are saying they might feel torn or worried about family loyalties. They are saying that "adoption" is a loaded word because it traditionally represents losing something — your name, ties to your birth family, information about your history — instead of gaining something.

Rather than blindly accepting their "no", it is the responsibility of the child welfare system to frame the conversation differently. Caring adults don't ask minor children to decide whether they will go to school or receive necessary medical or mental health services. Yet, in our child welfare system we give minor children discretionary veto power when it comes to having a safe and secure family, knowing all the while

that a family is every child's basic and fundamental right as well as the single most therapeutic influence in their lives over time. It is the responsibility of child welfare professionals:

- to know how to talk to youth about what is behind their "no".
 - to discuss the depth of each youth's fears and feelings.
 - to teach youth that they can have a safe and permanent family and also connections to the past families they hold dear.
 - to meaningfully engage birth families in understanding their youth's needs and plan for his or her future, even when they cannot parent full-time.
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- to first believe that permanency through adoption or guardianship is possible for youth at all ages, all levels of ability and disability and with all degrees of complexity in their lives.
 - and then to pursue the creative, non traditional and out-of-the-box practice approaches to building family connections that may make permanence a reality.

- ***The need to be committed to comprehensive, continuous and customized services.*** Youth who are reunified with their families of origin, youth who are welcomed into kinship families, and youth who find adoptive or guardian families all need to benefit from the range of life skills, supports, and services that prepare them for "the real world" of young adulthood. No matter who or what type of family steps forward, a full complement of youth-centered, family-focused services must be available and accessible if permanency for adolescents is to be successful.
- ***The need to engage youth in integrated life planning.*** A missing piece of the equation for older youth is the lack of a seamless process of *(continued on the next page)*

case planning and decision-making that concurrently addresses a youth's permanency need and his or her need for life skills, services and supports. Because of the compartmentalization of the current system, permanency planning and transition planning processes are sequestered from each other. Promising practices that integrate a full spectrum of life planning for older youth must be replicated and expanded.

- **The need to be youth-centered.** All too often, the case planning process for older youth in child welfare is done "to" or "for" rather than "with" the youth. Understandably, the collective wisdom tells us that without the youth steering and guiding the process, follow-through on tasks and success in outcomes is likely to suffer. The most promising practices put the youth "in the driver's seat", do not hold planning meetings without the youth, and assist youth in shaping their hopes, dreams, and strengths into viable plans for permanent family relationships and positive future goals.
- **The need to be family-focused, using an expanded definition of "family".** Optimal integrated life planning with youth is best accomplished with those safe, caring and committed adults who can be there for the youth over the long haul. Unless case planning addresses both the cut-offs and the connections in a youth's family relationships and meaningfully engages the significant adults in a youth's life, it will miss the mark. The most promising practices actively seek to identify all adults in a youth's natural network of relationships (birth family members, teachers, coaches, employers, former foster parents, former child care staff or social workers, mentors, etc.) interested in participating in joint planning for that youth's future and willing to play some ongoing role in his or her life.
- **The need to employ a collaborative process of family team planning and decision-making.** A family team meeting model that is youth-cen-

tered and family-focused as described above, offers the perfect opportunity for an outcome-oriented approach that leads to a plan for lifelong family relationships and life skills, services and supports. The most promising practices construct a family team from significant adults in a youth's life who become engaged in a mutual process of planning together with the youth, and exploring what it would take for them to make a permanent parenting commitment.

The time has come for sustained system changes that achieve outcomes in all three of the ASFA dimensions for older youth — safety, permanency and well-being. And the time has come for sustained system changes that assure all older youth — no matter what their age — a permanent parenting relationship, ongoing connections to birth and extended family *and* comprehensive life skills, supports and services. With AFCARS data reporting more than 25,000 youth, aged 16 and older, exiting foster care each year by emancipation or running² away rather than by achieving family permanency, merging the worlds of permanency and independent living services cannot come a minute too soon. ✨

Lauren Frey is the Project Manager at The Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice at Casey Family Services Administrative Office in New Haven, CT. The Casey Center is committed to working internally with its direct service divisions as well as externally with other states and agencies in promoting best practice for older youth in care – assuring them of a permanent parenting relationship, permanent extended family connections and comprehensive life skills, supports and services

¹ A. N. Maluccio, E. Fein and K. A. Olmstead in Permanency planning for children; concepts and methods. New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall.

A. Emler, J. Lahti, G. Downs, A. McKay and S. Downs (for Regional Research Institute for Human Services, Portland State University, Oregon). (n.d.) *Overcoming barriers to planning for children in foster care*. (DHEW Publication No. 78-30138). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

² *Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Report: Preliminary FY 2001*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families. Retrieved from <http://www.acf/hhs.gov/programs/cb/publications/afcars.htm>

For Youth: Help them organize important records, events, and accomplishments



**FYIB—
Involved,
Informed,
Independent**

Created by
FosterClub

Designed for
foster youth

to guide and help them become involved, informed and independent, this binder organizes all the important things youth need. It is a place to store and organize information and records, keep track of events, and file personal documents and information for court, education and independent living. Includes FYI forms that will help youth make their voice heard as advocates in their own behalf.

2001, 96pp., 8.5" x 11", 3-ring, loose-leaf binder
#328

1-250	Each	\$20.00
251-499	Each	\$17.50
500 or More	Each	\$15.00



**Creating Your
High School
Portfolio**

*An Interactive Guide
for Documenting
and Planning Your
Education, Career,
and Life*

Give your youth the gift of recording their accomplishments, skills, experience and dreams whether for college or work. A step by step guide to creating that record and developing a portfolio. Designed to be used and not just read, youth can write in this book, use the worksheets, and jot down notes in the margins or anywhere else.

2003, 160pp., 8.5" x 11", soft cover

352	Each	\$8.95
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The Path to Permanence: Innovative Strategies for Life Long Connections

Have you ever wondered what happens during a youth advisory board meeting, or what ideas young people generate when it comes to finding their own permanent connections? Have you ever sat in meeting scratching your head trying to find another way of recruiting foster/adoptive homes to create permanent connections for youth? Well, you are not alone! Fortunately there are youth/adult partnerships across the country generating all types of ideas. Listed below are several examples of the many innovative and creative ways youth have brainstormed to achieve meaningful connections with other adults. These stories specifically highlight creative ideas generated from a small youth advisory board, an individual youth, and an agency in a large metropolitan area.



The Parade

Picture a small community in rural Oklahoma: small downtown businesses, home cooking at Jake's barbecue, everyone knows everyone. Got it? Now think BIG! That is exactly what six young people on the Grady County youth advisory board did last fall during one of their meetings. In order to raise awareness of the need of foster/adoptive homes and mentors for youth in care in their community, they came up with a great idea: Enter a float in the annual Christmas parade, entitled, "Give a Priceless Gift This Year". The youth partnered with four adults and set about their planning. Community and agency collaboration soon ensued. The Department of Human Services which donated foster/adoptive recruitment promotion items such as key chains and refrigerator magnets to be handed out along the parade route. Local business donated candy to entice parade enthu-

siasts to interact with the the young people on float. Another idea that evolved during the planning phase was to create a book mark that highlighted six practical ways to support a youth in care, and hand it out too. After the planning was complete and the details ironed out, the youth dressed in costumes as precious gifts, hopped on the float, and proceeded down main street Chickasha, Oklahoma. The float was a success; the crowd clapped, talked and interacted as the youth passed by. In reflecting on the successful event, the youth were delighted by the positive feedback from the community. They found it especially gratifying to be able to interact directly with people as they walked with their float. The young people involved in this experience stated it was a great feeling to have a direct hand in promoting youth in care in their area in a positive way. In view of the great response we are hopeful this will become an annual event.

(continued on the next page)



I Know Best

Carol is a 16 year old girl who has been in the custody of the State since she was three years old. She has three siblings who have also experienced being part of the system most of their lives; two of them have already left care after aging out at 18. Carol also has a younger sibling who is 14. None of her siblings are adopted or have identified permanent connections. Carol's story is not uncommon and neither is the statement that Carol made when discussing her current situation in regard to her view of permanency. Carol stated, "I always knew what I wanted in parents," and when she met a couple at church, she just felt like these were the people she wanted as parents. After some time, she finally got enough courage to ask them if they would adopt her, and they immediately said yes. She has been living with her new family since Christmas 2003, and they expect the adoption to be finalized in June, 2004. Carol said her advice to other foster youth who might think they are too old to be adopted would be, "If you want something really badly, don't let go of your dream." She said that even though sometimes she wondered if she would ever find a family, she knew there had to be someone out there for her, so she just kept praying and believing. Carol is a shining example of a youth who was able to identify a permanent connection through her contact with a family in her community. In this case, for Carol, it was a couple she got to know through her church. Taking the time to help youth

identify who may already be in their life is yet another way to encourage the path to life long connections.

Agency Ingenuity

Small towns, individuals, and even large metropolitan cities all look for ways to help promote permanency for youth in care. One such agency in New York operates under the auspice of "You Gotta Believe! The Older Adoption and Permanency Movement, Inc." They utilize various methods to promote adoption of teens and 'tweens'. One catchy way to educate what was happening in their area was the use of a colorful poster. One side of the brightly colored poster featured the "10 ten reasons to Adopt a Teenager." Originally developed by the Oklahoma Youth Advisory Board in 2000, the reasons include:

1. No diapers to change
2. We sleep through the night
3. We will be ready to move out sooner...be we can still visit
4. You don't just get a child, you get a friend
5. We will keep you up to date with the latest fashion
6. No more car pools, we can drive you places
7. No bottles, formula or burp rags required
8. We can help out around the house
9. We can learn from you
10. We can teach you how to run your computer!



The flip side of the poster features a 2004 calendar including reminders about watching "Adopting Teens and 'Tweens TV show" on

Cablevision Other blurbs in the margin include reminders about attending their orientation meetings at various locations complete with contact informa-

tion. In addition to the color photos, the agency also includes their website address and area contact information for local offices. This creative tool provides useful information to catch people's attention and easily direct them to the resources for inquiry and follow through. For more information regarding this outreach idea you may contact their organization at www.you-gottabelieve.org ✨

Did You Know?*

- 49% of children in foster care are 11 years of age and older.
- Of all the children adopted from foster care, only 18% were 11 years of age and older.
- Children of color comprise 63% of all those in foster care.
- 24,227 youth left foster care without achieving permanency.

* Based on preliminary FY2001 AFCARS estimates as of March 2003.

YD Update is a bi-annual publication of The University of Oklahoma's National Resource Center for Youth Development providing current information on topics that impact young people in foster care. If you are interested in back issues of this publication, visit our web site, www.nrcys.ou.edu/nrcyd.

Editors: Kathy Sutter, Dorothy Ansell, Judy Jarvis
 Contributing Authors: Edi Winkle, Julie Deboard, Kyle Sprangle
 Art Director: Wayne Kruse

For more information about this publication contact the editors at: National Resource Center for Youth Development
 4502 E. 41st St., Bldg. 4 West
 Tulsa, OK 74135 • (918) 660-3700

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Connected by 25: A Plan for Investing in Successful Futures for Foster Youth

The transition from childhood to adulthood is often a precarious journey--filled with opportunity and risk. With proper guidance and support, young people explore their unique talents and interests, develop knowledge, skills, and aspirations, and acquire the relationships and connections that they will depend upon for a lifetime. Developing a strategy for public- and private-sector investments to help youth in foster care become connected by age 25 poses a significant challenge. This investment plan, produced by the Foster Care Work Group of the Youth Transition Funders Group, calls for government, foundations, community organizations, and individuals to mobilize their energy and resources with a greater focus on the future of foster youth and those aging out of foster care. The plan is available in a downloadable PDF format at <http://www.financeproject.org/>.

Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Conditions of Youth Preparing to Leave State Care

by Mark E. Courtney, Sherri Terao, Noel Bost

The Midwest Study is a collaborative effort of the state public child welfare agencies in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin and Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. This report presents preliminary findings from the first phase of data collection. The longitudinal study examines the transition to adulthood for 749 youth in the three states who are "aging out" of the child welfare system. The study is based on survey data that will be collected at three points in time from a sample of youth who were in foster care for at least one year prior to their 16th birthday. The first wave of data pertains to the experiences of youth who are 17 years old and still under the jurisdiction of the state child welfare system. The report is available in a downloadable PDF format at www.chapinhall.uchicago.edu.

Promising Practices Monographs Available

In November of 1999, Congress passed the Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA), modifying Section 477 of the Social Security Act (42 U.S.C. 677) and creating the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP). The legislation now requires greater account-

ability through outcome measures, standardized performance assessment systems, and a program evaluation, in addition to promoting collaborations, increasing funding for states, and targeting new populations for services. Due to the systemic and programmatic changes initiated by FCIA, public and private child welfare agencies need information on state-of-the-art program approaches and program models. To meet the need for information about promising practices, NRCYD has developed a series of monographs on the following topics:

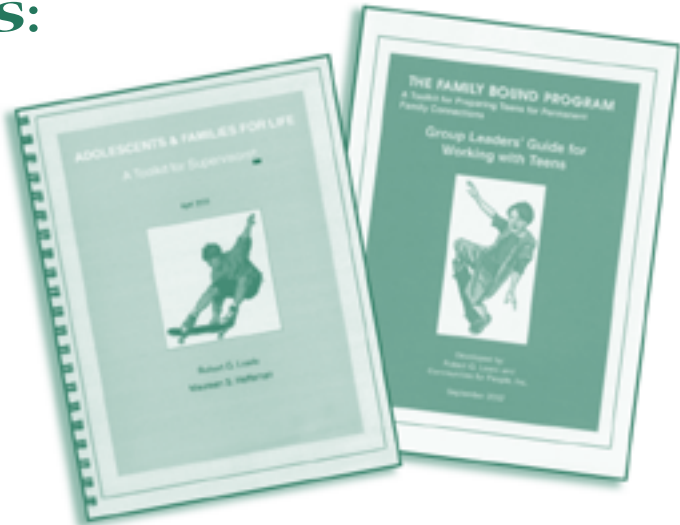
- Tribal Approaches to Transitions
- Aftercare Services
- The Transition Years: Serving Current and Former Foster Youth Ages Eighteen to Twenty-one

Each monograph was developed with the assistance of the New England Network for Child, Youth, and Family Services, the Mid-Atlantic Network for Youth and Family Services, the Southeastern Network of Youth and Family Services, and the Western States Youth Services Network and builds on the work of the Muskie School of Public Services at the University of Southern Maine and the National Resource Center for Youth Services. All three monographs are available free of charge at www.nrcys.ou.edu/NRCYD/publications.htm. A fourth monograph on Collaboration will be available in the summer of 2004.

California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYC)

The CPYC started in January 2003 as a result of a three-year grant awarded by the Stuart Foundation. The project's vision is "to achieve permanency for older children and youth in California so that no youth leaves foster care without a lifelong connection to a caring adult." The CPYC website outlines the project activities and provides information on programs and strategies for accomplishing permanency for foster youth. Additionally, this effort has produced two publications. *Model Programs for Youth Permanency* by Mardith J. Louisell, provides information on nine model programs of youth permanence. *Youth Perspectives on Permanency* by Reina M. Sanchez synthesizes young people's ideas, concerns, and hopes on permanency gathered through interviews and focus groups. For more information visit the website at www.cpyc.org.

From Robert Lewis: Tools to Help You Build Permanence for Teens



The Family Bound Program

A Tool Kit for Preparing Teens for Permanent Family Connections

Robert G. Lewis

In nine classroom sessions and five weekends with “practice” families, teens learn about families and how to function within one. They learn how to bring their unique values and strengths to the family and how to negotiate and compromise over differences and family rules. They learn how to come to terms with past mistakes, mourn their losses and ensure better outcomes in the future.

At the conclusion, “practice” families work with agency staff and teens to identify existing family resources or recruit new family connections — for life.

2002, 227pp., 8.5” x 11”, soft cover, spiral bound

316	Complete Set		\$89.95
	Guide	Each	\$59.95
	Teen Handbook	Set of 10	\$15.00
	Parents Handbook	Set of 10	\$15.00

Adolescents & Families for Life

A Toolkit for Supervisors

Robert G. Lewis; Maureen Heffernan

The Toolkit is a unique workbook for professionals who need to guide, train, and supervise staff to insure permanence for the adolescents on their caseloads. Organized into three sections, “Making the Case for Permanence,” “Choosing, Using and Developing Tools with Teens,” and “Supporting Permanence,” the Toolkit breaks down the issue of permanence for teens into 27 short, staff-meeting length teachable units. **Includes a CD-ROM, plus a PowerPoint presentation of the complete Toolkit, unit-by-unit and section-by-section.**

2000, 8.5” x 11”, soft cover, spiral bound, CD-ROM

258	Each	\$59.95
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Please Ship

The Family Bound Program

___ Complete Set	\$ 89.95
___ Guide	\$ 59.95
___ Teen Handbook (Set of 10)	\$ 15.00
___ Parents Handbook (Set of 10)	\$ 15.00

Adolescents & Families for Life

___ Each	\$ 59.95
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Total	\$

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NRCYD WebNews

The NRCYD web site continues to post publications, news, and resources relevant to the field. Some of the new items you can find on our site include:

News

- > Pew Commission
- > Recommendations by Chapin Hall Study on 3 Midwestern States

Events

- > Information on our upcoming Destination Future 2004 Conference

Publications

- > Our 3 new Promising Practices Monographs
- > Tribal Approaches to Transition
- > Aftercare Services
- > The Transition Years
- > CFSR Analysis from a Youth Development Perspective

Programs

- > Detailed information on Education and Training Vouchers (ETV)
- > Listing of completed Independent Living Curriculum Grantees and free download of most of the curricula

Resources

- > A detailed listing of our sister resource centers, clearinghouses and Federal Regional Contacts

State-By-State

- > Information on specific state ETV programs



National Resource Center for Youth Development

A service of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau

The University of Oklahoma operates the National Resource Center for Youth Development (NRCYD) through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau.

NRCYD, with other federally funded resource centers, is part of the Children's Bureau National Training and Technical Assistance Initiative.

The latter part of the 1990's saw increased federal attention and supporting legislation designed to protect the safety and well being of children and youth in the child welfare system, beginning with passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) in 1997. This landmark legislation was followed by passage of the Foster Care Independence Act in 1999. NRCYD is here to help you implement these new legislative initiatives for adolescents in your care.

Training and Technical Assistance Services

At the National Resource Center for Youth Development, we value the unique strengths, needs and resilience of adolescents and challenge you to do the same.

We stand ready to help you incorporate youth development/ involvement approaches into all areas of your programs and services, to implement services that address legislative requirements, and to meet the increased call for accountability/ outcomes in child welfare services.

Training and technical assistance activities assist states and tribes to:

- Implement Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 and the Adoption and Safe Families Act legislation.
- Develop policies and practices that effectively incorporate such legislation.
- Build your capacity, through training, to deliver culturally competent, competency-based services.
- Develop and implement a program improvement plan based on your Children and Family Services Review.
- Incorporate permanency planning practices for adolescents.
- Develop Education and Training Voucher Programs.

For More Information

If your agency is a tribal or publicly administered child welfare agency, you can access NRCYD services. Contact your Administration for Children and Families federal regional office. Call us today for information on training, technical assistance, information and referral, and conference support services available through the National Resource Center for Youth Development.



The University of Oklahoma OUTREACH
National Resource Center for Youth Services

(918) 660-3700 | Fax (918) 660-3737

www.nrcys.ou.edu

Destination Future 2004 Youth Leadership Conference Uniting The Voices of Youth

Destination Future is a youth leadership conference aimed at achieving two primary goals.

Goal 1: To increase the capacity of youth to advocate for themselves and others in care through training and development of leadership skills.

Goal 2: To provide a mechanism for youth in care or recently emancipated from care to inform service providers and policy makers on the issues that impact children and youth in out-of-home care.

At Destination Future 2004, you will join other youth and adults from across the country and Puerto Rico to discuss and address issues concerning national initiatives like the Child and Family Services Reviews, the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, Educational Training Vouchers, and Transitional Living Programs. Youth who attend this conference make the system better for themselves, and pave the way for change for those who follow.

Register on-line at www.nrcys.ou.edu/df04reg



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