

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

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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  
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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 running<sup>2</sup> away rather than by achieving family permanency, merging the worlds of permanency and independent living services cannot come a minute too soon. ✨

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> *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>

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