

Families

for Life:

Addressing the Needs of Older Children and Youth in Foster Care



Fact Sheet One: Defining Family Permanence

Family permanence can best be defined as an enduring family relationship that:

- Is safe and meant to last a lifetime;
- Offers the legal rights and social status of full family membership;
- Provides for physical, emotional, social, cognitive and spiritual well-being; and
- Assures lifelong connections to extended family, siblings, and other significant adults, and to family history and traditions, race and ethnic heritage, culture, religion, and language.¹

Family permanence can substantially improve the chances for future success of all vulnerable children who come into contact with America's child welfare system. Family permanence ultimately can reduce the numbers of youth who enter care as well as those who "age out" of foster care without a family.

Change will require new practices, adequate and flexible funding, improved incentives for systems and individual families, and redefined goals and measures of accountability for policy makers and practitioners.

Permanence is both a value and a goal of practice. For youth in state care to become successful and emotionally healthy in adulthood, they must leave the foster care system in a planned manner that connects them to a lifelong family.

Specific elements of family permanence important to older youth include:

- Involvement of the youth as a participant or leader in the process;
- A permanent connection with at least one adult who provides love; unconditional commitment; lifelong support; a safe, stable and secure parenting relationship; and a legal relationship if possible; and
- The opportunity to maintain contact with personally important people, including birth siblings.

In the end, more than 25,000 foster youth "age out" of state care or run away every year before authorities can reunite them with their parents, place them permanently with relatives, or secure an adoptive family. These vulnerable youth lack any ongoing connection to family members or caring adults.²

Federal, state, and local authorities must recognize the critical importance of permanent family connections for youth in foster care if substantial progress is to be made in improving outcomes for these "disconnected" youth. Policies and funding must bolster these critical connections.

Child welfare systems can bring children the permanence they need by:

- Providing support to families so children can remain safely with their own parents and family members (i.e., avoid foster care placement) or return safely to their parents and family members;
- Placing children at risk with relatives who are willing and able to care for them;
- Discharging the children to legal guardians (including grandparents, aunts/uncles, and other relatives);
- Facilitating adoption by relatives or unrelated families; and
- In rare circumstances (when no other option is available), creating alternative planned living arrangements while nurturing continued family connections.

- End -

1. *A Call to Action: An Integrated Approach to Youth Permanency and Preparation for Adulthood*, April 2005, Casey Family Services in collaboration with California Permanency for Youth Project, Casey Family Program, and Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative.

2. Louisell, Mardi. *Model Programs on Youth Permanency*. California Permanency for Youth Project and California Permanency for Youth Task Force. 2003 (cpyp.org)

The 2006 National Convening on Youth Permanence

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