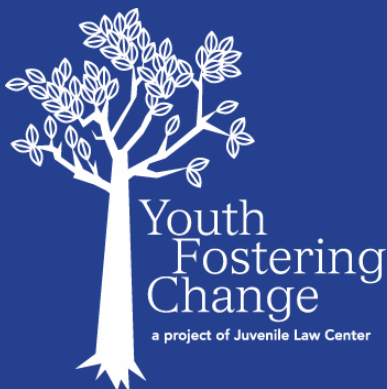




TOOLS FOR SUCCESS

A Toolkit for Child Welfare Professionals
to Achieve Permanency and Stability
for Youth in Foster Care



Juvenile
Law Center

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A Toolkit for Child Welfare Professionals to Achieve Permanency & Stability for Youth in Foster Care

A publication of Youth Fostering Change, created during the 2017-2018 Youth Advocacy Program year, in collaboration with Juvenile Law Center staff.

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Juvenile Law Center advocates for rights, dignity, equity and opportunity for youth in the foster care and justice systems.

Founded in 1975, Juvenile Law Center is the first non-profit, public interest law firm for children in the country. We fight for youth through litigation, appellate advocacy and submission of amicus (friend-of-the-court) briefs, policy reform, public education, training, consulting, and strategic communications. Widely published and internationally recognized as leaders in the field, Juvenile Law Center has substantially shaped the development of law and policy on behalf of youth. We strive to ensure that laws, policies, and practices affecting youth advance racial and economic equity and are rooted in research, consistent with children's unique developmental characteristics, and reflective of international human rights values. For more information about Juvenile Law Center's work, visit www.jlc.org.

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ABOUT YOUTH FOSTERING CHANGE

Youth Fostering Change (YFC) is an advocacy program for youth who are currently or formerly involved in the child welfare system. Each year, YFC researches issues affecting youth in foster care and analyzes current advocacy strategies. Youth advocates then determine a strategy to address the issue, including developing policy recommendations and a campaign to raise awareness of the issue and YFC's work.

We believe in the power of youth voice. Young people are experts on their own lives, and their lived experiences should inform policies that affect them. Since 2008, Juvenile Law Center's Youth Advocacy Program has prepared young people ages 15-22 to lead advocacy and policy reform efforts in their local communities and beyond. Youth advocates develop leadership skills, political knowledge, communication and storytelling skills, and a sense of community. By sharing their personal experiences, youth advocates affect policy change through advocacy, media outreach, and public education.

SPECIAL THANKS

We would like to thank the Department of Human Services in Philadelphia for supporting our projects each year and the Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network (SWAN) for meeting with us and supporting our project. Thanks to Juvenile Law Center staff for constantly working alongside us to uplift our stories and create projects to help better the system for ALL youth.

ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

Background

Across the country, over 20,000 youth age out of care each year without permanent family connections and stability. Within 18 months of aging out, 40-50% of former foster youth become homeless.

In Pennsylvania, 8,639 (33%) of the state's foster care population are between ages 14 and 21, generally referred to as "transition age youth." Almost half (49%) of Pennsylvania's transition age youth age out without being reunified or connected to a permanent family. This means thousands of young people are leaving the state's care without adequate support, a loving family, or the resources and people necessary for them to grow into thriving adults.

What's in This Toolkit?

Many of us aged out without family or supportive connections, or we are about to leave the system without gaining permanency and are uncertain about our lives after foster care. We believe all youth deserve permanency and supportive adult connections—both are essential to success in adulthood.

Based on what we know about our own stories and those of our peers in foster care, we created a toolkit and recommendations to improve permanency outcomes for children in foster care, regardless of circumstances or age. This publication identifies some of the challenges we faced or are still facing as older youth in care.

This toolkit is for social workers, advocates, case workers, and other professionals to support youth in care to achieve permanency. This toolkit includes the definition and legal obligations for permanency planning, as well as tools and best practices for working with youth to achieve permanency. We developed these materials based on our experiences in care and with aging out of the system.

We want you to understand that youth want permanency and family—and we need your help to achieve it! No matter our age, permanency should be continuously sought. We need you to believe that we deserve permanency and to work creatively alongside us to make it a reality. We hope this guide is useful for you to better connect with youth and support youth in foster care to find family.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across the country, over 20,000 youth age out of foster care annually without permanent family connections or stability. Within 18 months of aging out, 40-50% of former foster youth become homeless.

In Pennsylvania, 8,639 (33%) of the state's foster care population are between ages 14 and 21, generally referred to as "transition age youth." Almost half (49%) of Pennsylvania's transition age youth age out without being reunified or connected to a permanent family. This means thousands of young people are leaving the state's care without adequate support, a loving family, or the resources and people necessary for them to grow into thriving adults.

Many members of Youth Fostering Change aged out without family or supportive connections. Some of us are about to leave the system without permanency. We are uncertain about our lives and futures. Our goal is to improve permanency outcomes for children in foster care, regardless of circumstances or age.

We believe all youth in foster care deserve permanency and supportive adult connections—both are essential to success in adulthood. This toolkit is based on our own experiences in care and with aging out. This toolkit is for social workers, advocates, case workers, and other child welfare professionals to further support their work to achieve meaningful legal permanency and relational permanency. It includes the definition and obligations for legal permanency planning, as well as tools and best practices for working with youth to achieve permanency.

We want to help child welfare professionals enhance permanency planning and improve outcomes for all youth in foster care. We recommend using this toolkit as a guide before client meetings as well as throughout the duration of a case in order to fully leverage the tools, tips, and best practices. We believe that using these tools will strengthen your advocacy and will allow you to build relationships for youth and reach the best permanency outcome.

We hope this guide is useful for you to better connect with and support youth. As alumni and current youth in the system, we need professionals to understand that youth want permanency and family—and we need your help to achieve it! We know you believe that youth of any age deserve permanency, and we want you to keep working creatively with us to make it a reality for ALL youth in foster care.

The following summary of our recommendations are based on our experiences and are explained in more detail in the toolkit.

1. Communicate the Importance of Permanency

Youth deserve respect: make sure to explain what permanency is and why it's important, and listen to their views and concerns. In addition, be mindful of trauma and adolescent development when communicating about a youth's case planning and when building relationships with supportive adults.

2. Meaningfully Engage Youth in Their Permanency Planning

To be successful in permanency planning, youth need to be on board, invested, and clear about their permanency goals. Engaging youth starts with including them in discussions and preparing them for planning meetings. Think about how meetings are planned, including the logistics for youth to attend and fully participate.

3. Facilitate Placement Stability

Youth need to feel safe in placements. They deserve stable living arrangements where they are secure, treated with respect, cared for, and loved. Youth need to know about their new placement or placement changes in advance, including the location, when they will arrive, with whom they will stay, and the placement type.

4. Cultivate Youth's Connections with Kin

Youth need help staying connected with family. Research shows that many youth who age out turn to family for support. Family separation causes trauma and grief, and maintaining family connections is important for emotional health and well-being. Consider reunification, and if it isn't an option, youth may still want those relationships.

5. Focus on Relational Permanency and Legal Permanency

Youth want legal permanency when possible, but having a network of consistent, supportive relationships that last past aging-out of care is just as important. Most people don't have just one person who provides all the support they will ever need. If youth have the option of multiple supportive adults, then youth can have all the support that they need.

6. Follow the Family Finding Requirements

Family finding is a great way to identify people who can provide different types of support for youth to achieve permanency. State law requires annual family finding work; ideally this process starts early and increasingly involves youth as they age. Work with youth during family finding, so they can identify supportive connections and develop a plan for how to involve and reach out to the adult.

7. Ensure a Comprehensive Transition Plan Is in Place, Including Direct Connections to Services and Resources

Regardless of a youth's permanency goal, transition plans are vital to youth entering adulthood. Without a solid plan, youth tend to focus on short-term rather than long-term goals. Developing a transition plan with youth that includes connections to people, skill-building, and resources is essential for their stability.

TRANSITION AGE YOUTH in Pennsylvania

THE FACTS

33% of PA's foster youth are transition age youth



47% of transition age youth are in group homes or institutions

49% age out of care, instead of being connected to family

25% of transition age youth have been in 2+ placements while in care

42% of have been in 3+ placements



BY AGE 21...



37% experience homelessness or unstable housing

Just 44% of transition age youth have full- or part-time employment



Only 75% earn a GED or high school diploma, compared to 92% of their peers

**WE HAVE THE TOOLS TO
CHANGE THE STORY FOR
TRANSITION AGE YOUTH.**



COMPONENTS OF PERMANENCY

What is “Permanency”?

The term “permanency” is often used to refer to the final legal outcome of a dependency case, such as reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship.

The concept of permanency, however, is actually much broader, including both “legal permanency” (a permanent family relationship recognized by the law) and “relational permanency,” or lifelong relationships that support physical, emotional, and social well-being.

Put simply, “permanency” refers to enduring family relationships that are supportive, legally recognized, and meant to last a lifetime.

We need you to believe we deserve permanency, especially if we lose hope that it can be achieved.

HOW YOUTH FOSTERING CHANGE DEFINES PERMANENCY:

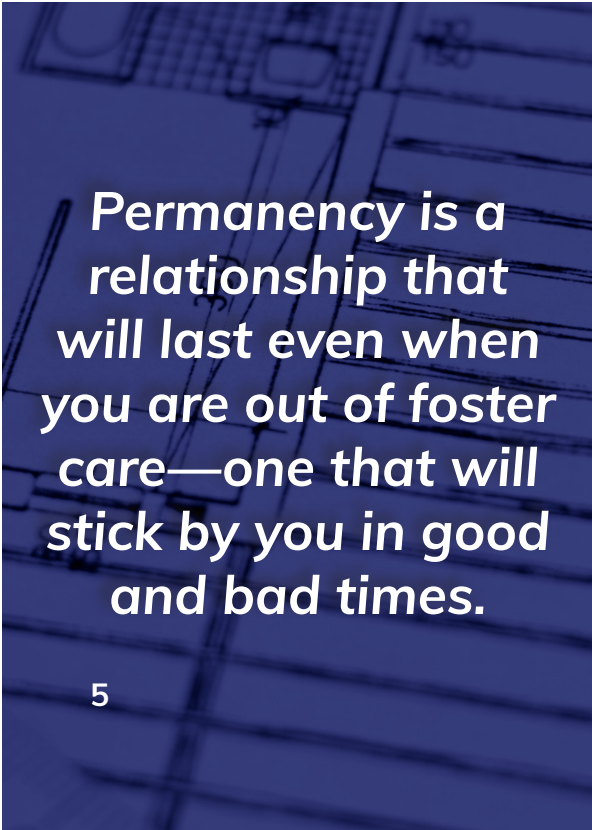
We believe permanency and the process to achieve permanency should actively include youth, recognize adolescent development, and include best practices for every youth’s plan.

We define permanency as having supportive adult connections, not just a place to live. Permanency provides youth a series of relationships that:

- Provide the same support that family members would provide,
- Provide emotional support and guidance,
- Provide unconditional love,
- Help youth build and learn skills,
- Encourage skills, talents, and potential for the future, and
- Provide a home and help youth with resources, like help to make ends meet, a place to stay for holidays or emergencies, or just someone to call.

Components of Permanency Planning Process to Support Youth Development:

- Start the process to identify permanent supportive adults as soon as youth enter care.
- Help us learn how to be thriving young adults and receive support from our team.
- Involve us in every step of the permanency planning process; help us understand what is going on in our case, even if it might upset us, and let us have input in goal-setting.
- Search our case files and help us think about our history so we can identify caring adults.
- Help us understand concurrent planning so we can try to develop multiple plans and back-up plans all at the same time.
- Follow up and follow through with the steps established in meetings. It helps us trust you and believe in the plan we are working on together.
- Do not give up on us! For many of us, APPLA was overused when case workers gave up on finding us homes because of our behavior or because we were deemed “too old.”
- Believe we deserve family, and tell us that we deserve family—even if we act like we do not believe you!



Permanency is a relationship that will last even when you are out of foster care—one that will stick by you in good and bad times.



KEY POINTS: LEGAL OBLIGATIONS TO ACHIEVE PERMANENCY

While each child and professional may think about permanency differently, there are certain requirements that professionals must meet when assisting youth in the planning process. One such requirement is following a permanency hierarchy. For young people, permanency isn't just a word on a case plan—it is our lives.

Please note that this is not an exhaustive list of legal rights for youth in the child welfare system in the United States or in Pennsylvania. This toolkit includes other legal obligations listed throughout the publication.

Limitations on APPLA

APPLA stands for “Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement.” It is the least preferred plan. In the past, it has been overused for older youth and usually means youth will age out without achieving permanency. Recent changes in federal law greatly reduce the use of APPLA. The law now prohibits the use of APPLA as a permanency plan for youth under age 16. 42 U.S.C.A. § 675(5)(C)(i). For youth age 16 or older, the child welfare agency must meet many requirements before it can select the permanency goal of APPLA to ensure it is used rarely. To select or maintain the plan of APPLA, the court must make specific findings that:

- The agency has documented the intensive, ongoing, unsuccessful efforts to achieve reunification, adoption, guardianship, or placement with a fit and willing relative;
- APPLA is the best permanency plan for the child and there is a compelling reason it is not in the best interest of the youth to return home, be placed for adoption, enter a guardianship agreement, or be placed with a fit and willing relative;
- Both the agency and the court have asked the youth about his or her desired permanency outcome; and
- The agency is taking steps to ensure that the reasonable and prudent parent standard is being exercised and that the child has regular and ongoing opportunities to engage in age- or developmentally-appropriate activities. 42 U.S.C.A. § 675a(a).

Permanency hearings must continue every six months even after a goal of APPLA is assigned. Pennsylvania law goes beyond the federal requirements, mandating that, for youth with a goal of APPLA, the county agency must identify at least one significant connection with a supportive adult willing to be involved in the child's life as the child transitions to adulthood, or document that efforts have been made to identify a supportive adult. The court must also make findings that the significant connection is identified in the permanency plan or that efforts have been made to identify a supportive adult, if no one is currently identified. 42 Pa. C.S.A. § 6351(f.1) (5).

Connecting Youth with Family

Federal and state law support placement with family and kin. Reunification is the most preferred permanency plan, and placement with kin is preferred if a youth does enter the child welfare system.

Federal law requires reasonable efforts to place siblings together and to provide for frequent visitation when siblings are not jointly placed. 42 U.S.C. § 671(a)(31). Pennsylvania law goes even further, requiring that siblings be placed together unless it is contrary to the safety or well-being of either sibling. If siblings cannot be placed together, Pennsylvania law requires visitation be provided at least two times per month. 42 Pa. C.S.A. § 6351(b)(5) & (b.1).

Involvement of Youth in Permanency Planning

Beginning at age 14, the youth must be consulted in the development of the case plan and must be allowed to involve two individuals in case planning who are not a foster parent or part of the casework staff. 42 U.S.C.A. § 675(5)(C)(iv).

Reasonable Efforts to Finalize the Permanency Plan

The court must make a finding at least once a year that reasonable efforts are being made to finalize the child's permanency plan. 42 U.S.C. § 671(a)(15). In Pennsylvania, youth have permanency hearings at least twice per year. At each hearing, the court must review the permanency plan and the progress that is being made to achieve it. 42 Pa. C.S.A. § 6351(e).

Least Restrictive Placement

States must ensure each child in the custody of the child welfare system has a case plan designed to achieve placement in a safe setting that is the least restrictive (most family-like) and most appropriate setting available. 42 U.S.C. § 675(5)(A) (1). This means youth should be in family settings in the community—not in group homes or institutional care.



TOOLS FOR IMPROVING PERMANENCY OUTCOMES FOR OLDER YOUTH

Tool 1: Talking about Permanency with Youth

GOAL: HAVE CONSTRUCTIVE DISCUSSIONS ABOUT PERMANENCY

It's important to speak directly with youth to learn what they want and need in a family. If a young person appears to reject the idea of permanency, explore why they may be hesitant about it rather than ending the conversation.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Youth need to be understood on their own terms and be talked to in a way that is respectful and considerate of how they understand their situations, their histories, and their ability to process information as a young adult.

Try to understand the youth's unique, individual experience and why they may be unwilling to trust adults at first. Always strive to have good relationships with youth; communicate patiently and in ways that build their understanding of permanency and the planning process. When professionals develop trusting relationships with youth, it is easier to work together on achieving permanency.

OUR EXPERIENCES

- Feeling that our presence at meetings wasn't acknowledged.
- Our team didn't follow up or action steps were unclear.
- Not communicating in a youth-friendly way about how we were doing.
- Having our comments disregarded or ignored.
- Feeling disrespected.
- Not feeling heard or feeling our attempts to speak up were futile.
- Struggling to trust or love adults, making positive communication a challenge for us.

Most of us did not understand what permanency was or the purpose of the meetings.

We were left in the dark about what permanency is and the process to achieve it.

BEST PRACTICES

- Build a relationship based on trust to ensure there is open communication between you and the young person.
- Have a conversation with youth about the meaning of permanency and the planning process. Explain concepts in a youth-friendly way and use examples.
- Talk to youth about the importance of their participation in permanency planning.
- If youth have concerns or questions, answer in a meaningful way and make time to answer their questions.
- Work with the young person to develop incentives for participation, such as a reward system to recognize and acknowledge their participation in the meetings. Encourage youth to consistently attend meetings.

DID YOU KNOW

The court should consult with the child in an age-appropriate manner regarding the proposed permanency and transition plans. 42 U.S.C.A. § 675(5)(C)(iii).

Youth age 14 and over must be provided with a list of rights regarding education, health, visitation, and court participation; the right to discharge documents; and the right to stay safe and avoid exploitation. 42 U.S.C.A. § 675a(b)(1) & (b)(2).

Tool 2: Engaging Youth in Permanency Planning Meetings and Dependency Court Hearings

GOAL: ACTIVELY AND CONTINUOUSLY ENGAGE YOUTH IN THE PLANNING PROCESS

This includes scheduling meetings that work with the youth's schedule and ensuring youth can attend and are fully engaged during the meetings. Always follow up with youth after each permanency planning meeting.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Youth deserve to understand the structure and purpose of their permanency meetings. This includes knowing who will attend, informing youth they can bring supportive adults, and giving youth many opportunities to share their preferred permanency goals. Youth deserve to understand and be fully engaged throughout the process because of its immeasurable impact on their lives and futures.

OUR EXPERIENCES

- Meetings were scheduled without our consideration.
- There were a lot of meetings, and we sometimes had to miss school to attend.
- The meeting's purpose wasn't always clearly explained to us.
- No prep from our team before the meetings, so we couldn't meaningfully participate.
- Transportation wasn't reliable or available for us to get to the meetings.
- The meeting outcomes didn't reflect what we want or need.
- We did not know who would attend, and this affected our willingness to participate.

BEST PRACTICES

- Make sure youth know they can bring people they care about to the planning meetings, and help youth identify these individuals.
- Create a plan to ensure youth can attend permanency meetings, including regularly reminding youth about upcoming meetings. It's important to speak directly with the youth to remind them about a meeting.
- Ask if youth want help preparing for meetings and debrief with them after meetings.
- Give youth advance notice of who will attend and participate (including biological parents), and explain each person's role in the meeting.

If we attended our permanency meetings, we did not feel engaged, and our desires and concerns were not addressed.

Many meetings were scheduled without us, and we did not understand everyone's role in the meeting.

- Ensure all meetings begin with positive updates about the youth.
- Set a youth-friendly agenda that ensures youth understand the discussion and goals of the meeting (for example, talk slowly and avoid jargon).
- If specific action steps are brought up during the meeting, highlight them at the end of the meeting and then follow up.

FOR DEPENDENCY COURT HEARINGS:

- Meaningfully engage youth in their hearings and make sure they have opportunities to speak in court.
- Give youth multiple opportunities to prepare for court, including meeting with their attorney and case manager to discuss what to expect; this should be done in a way youth understand.

DID YOU KNOW

Transportation is often a challenge for youth to attend meetings. Professionals should arrange adequate transportation so that youth can attend meetings.

YFC developed tools to help youth prepare for court with their attorney and understand their rights in court in P.A. To learn more go to:

<https://at.jlc.org/YFC-youthincourt>.

Tool 3: Facilitating Placement Stability to Gain Permanency

GOAL: SUPPORT YOUTH TO MAINTAIN PLACEMENT STABILITY

To achieve placement stability, youth need caseworkers who listen to them, help them problem solve when things are not going well, and respond when a youth is not being treated appropriately in a placement.

Speak with youth directly to learn what they want and need in a family, and if youth appear to reject the idea of permanency, explore why youth may be hesitant instead of ending the conversation.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Placement stability allows youth time to develop relationships with people in their community. Communicate with youth about how they feel about their placement, and identify and follow up with youth about any challenges—both are key to building rapport and achieving placement stability.

Youth have a better chance at gaining permanency when they are in a consistent placement where they are respected, listened to, and provided with necessary resources.

OUR EXPERIENCES

- Feeling unsafe in placements.
- Placement conditions were not appropriate for us.
- Running away from placements due to harsh conditions or to see biological family and other kin.
- Trouble connecting with adults in placements.
- Being placed in residential treatment facilities and group homes for too long—we should have been in homes.
- Placement changes without explanation.
- Being removed from a placement instead of getting help with problem-solving or conflict resolution.
- Not feeling believed when we revealed poor treatment in placements.
- Fearing the next placement would be worse and not disclosing poor treatment at our current placement.

BEST PRACTICES

- Understand and be attentive to youth who identify challenges in placements and work with them to resolve the challenges.
- Match youth in homes that better fit them and their identified goals.
- Have an introduction with youth and the families before placing them, even if this must happen the first day of placement.
- Use the “Teen Success Agreement” to set house rules and resolve disagreements.
- Train caregivers and facility staff on understanding trauma, foster care, and adolescent development.
- Actively engage foster parents in the permanency planning process with youth to build connections between the youth and family.
- Work with the family and youth on de-escalation and constructive communication.
- Consistently tell youth that you want to know if they are being treated badly, and respond when they raise concerns.
- Communicate that youth deserve to be treated well, and that it is unacceptable when a youth says a placement is “not that bad!”

Feeling unsafe or not connecting with foster families led to more placement disruptions.

Some of us experienced unsafe conditions and abusive foster families or group homes.

We lost trust and hope for finding a loving, family or supportive adults.

Tool 4: Cultivating Connections with Biological Family

GOAL: MAINTAIN FAMILY AND KIN CONNECTIONS

Another key to achieving permanency is maintaining a youth's established permanent connections with biological family and kin. Prioritize these relationships when youth enter care, and support youth to communicate and engage with family.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

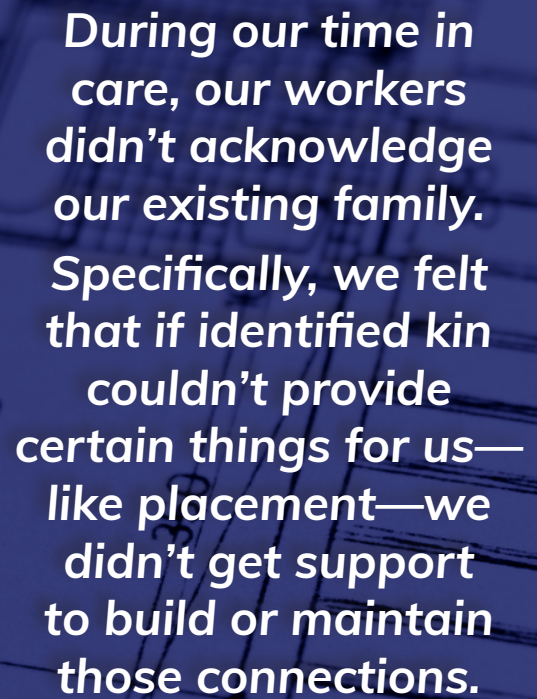
Entering care can be traumatic. Youth can be separated from their siblings, family, and kin—experiencing grief and losing family connections. Youth care about their family members even if they may not be able to provide for the young person.

Cultivating these family relationships while a youth is in care is essential to their mental, physical, and emotional health and well-being.

Maintaining these connections helps young people feel a sense of community and can lead to a better chance of leaving care with multiple supportive connections.

OUR EXPERIENCES

- We lost connections with our siblings and weren't supported to maintain the relationships.
- No assistance maintaining relationships with our relatives who couldn't provide placement.
- No support for relationships with relatives who were important to us because the agency did not think they were a good influence.
- Running away and going to our biological parents or families' homes.
- Losing relationships if we or our siblings were adopted.
- Feeling anger, grief, and loss from family separation and struggling to adjust, even in supportive placements.



During our time in care, our workers didn't acknowledge our existing family. Specifically, we felt that if identified kin couldn't provide certain things for us—like placement—we didn't get support to build or maintain those connections.

BEST PRACTICES

- Work with youth to identify, connect with, and maintain relationships with biological family and extended kin and relatives.
- At minimum, support youth to reach out and connect to biological family and kin.
- Assist youth with maintaining these connections, including providing transportation and support for how to stay connected with family.
- Arrange sibling visits more frequently than Pennsylvania's minimum legal requirement (twice a month). This helps youth to maintain sibling relationships.
- Use the SWAN Child Profile to help youth learn about their biological families and history so they can better understand and identify other family connections. The SWAN Child Profile is an in-depth summary of the child's life history.

DID YOU KNOW

Federal law requires reasonable efforts to place siblings together and to provide for frequent visitation when siblings are not jointly placed. 42 U.S.C. § 671(a)(31).

Pennsylvania law goes even further, requiring that siblings be placed together unless it is contrary to the safety or well-being of either sibling. If siblings cannot be placed together, Pennsylvania law requires that visitation be provided at least two times per month. 42 Pa. C.S.A. § 6351(b)(5) & (b.1).

Tool 5: Identifying, Initiating, and Maintaining Relationships with Supportive Adults and Kin

GOAL: SUPPORT YOUTH TO IDENTIFY AND MAINTAIN CONNECTIONS WITH SUPPORTIVE ADULTS

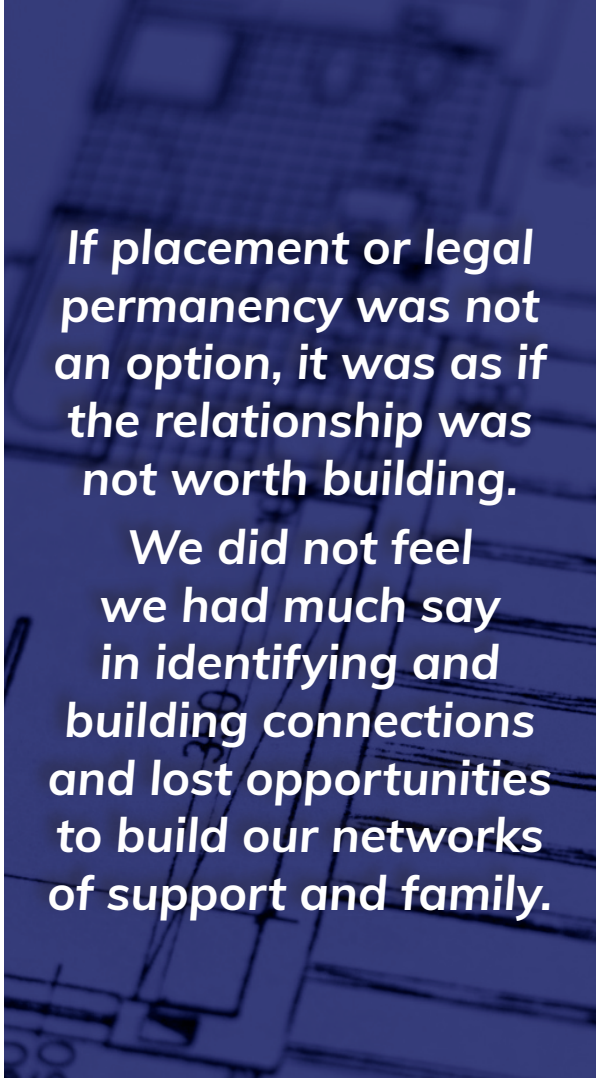
Youth in care should also have connections with supportive adults in their lives. These include relatives and people who the young person identifies as important to them (kin) as well as relationships that professionals help youth develop through permanency services such as child-specific recruitment.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

When youth have a network of supportive adults, they have access to more people who can support them in different ways. It is vital that youth have people in their lives who they can count on and go to when things get hard. Youth need people who can help them grow into successful adults, and they need support from their child welfare team to develop and maintain these relationships. This work grows the young person's network and also contributes to their success after foster care.

OUR EXPERIENCES

- We lost connections with supportive adults who were in our lives before care.
- Constantly moving placements caused us to lose contact or limited our ability to build lasting relationships.
- We struggled to build and maintain connections with supportive adults due to mistrusting others because of our experiences.
- We didn't get the emotional or logistical support to connect to supportive adults.
- We didn't always know who the supportive adults were in our lives or how they could help us.
- We aged out of care without any supportive adult connections.
- When we had help building and maintaining connections with supportive adults, it helped us grow and created opportunities for us.

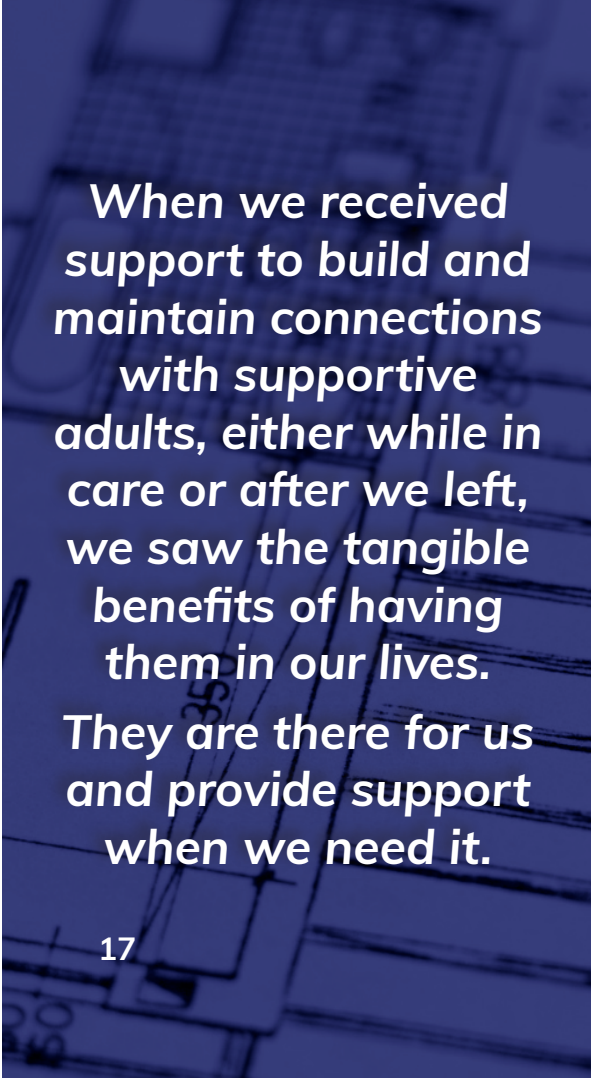


If placement or legal permanency was not an option, it was as if the relationship was not worth building.

We did not feel we had much say in identifying and building connections and lost opportunities to build our networks of support and family.

BEST PRACTICES

- Identify supportive adults and talk about the importance of this support throughout a youth's time in care.
- Use the youth's case file and family finding technology to identify connections.
- Ask youth about adults who are important to them.
- Explain that youth can be connected to supportive adults in different ways, and ask youth about the types of relationships they would like to have. Remind them that not all connections have to be placements.
- Ask what you can do to help youth connect to supportive adults and to maintain those relationships, including with family.
- Ask what skills youth need to develop to maintain positive connections and to learn how to recognize healthy and unhealthy relationships.
- Respect the relationships that are important to youth. If you think these relationships are unhealthy, help youth understand why.



When we received support to build and maintain connections with supportive adults, either while in care or after we left, we saw the tangible benefits of having them in our lives.

They are there for us and provide support when we need it.

Tool 6: Meaningfully Engaging Youth in Family Finding

GOAL: BETTER ENGAGE YOUTH IN THE FAMILY FINDING PROCESS

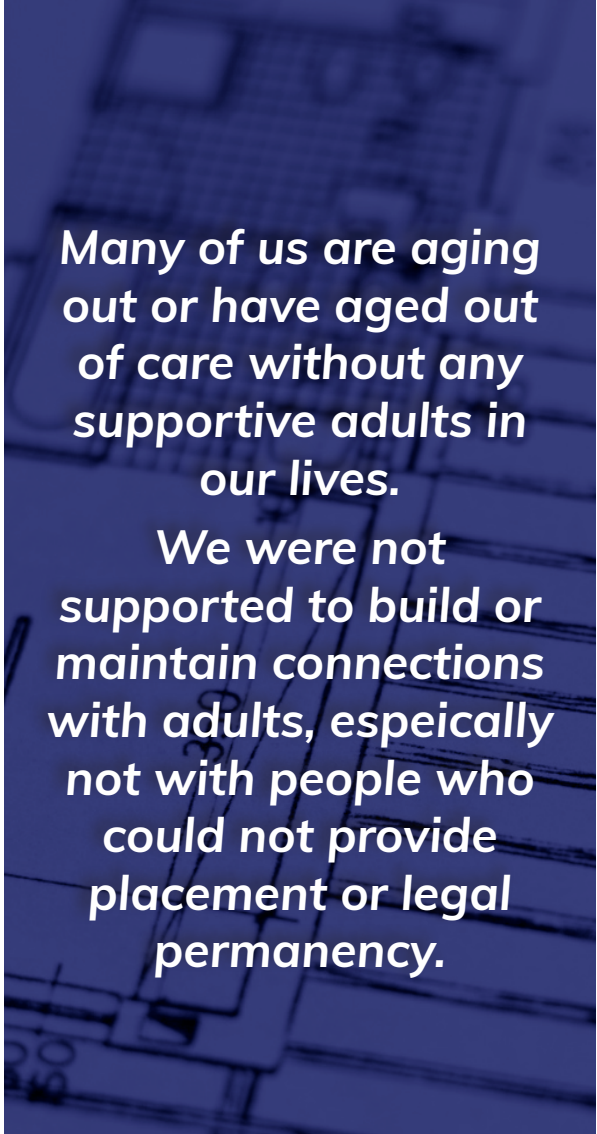
Youth should be actively engaged in the family finding process, including deciding who is contacted and how, and getting support to build and maintain these connections.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Family finding is a powerful way to identify potential connections and can provide a supportive network for youth as they enter adulthood. Youth need to understand the process and what can happen once connections are identified. They need to have opportunities to talk through their feelings and options. When youth don't have this information or are not engaged in the process, they may not be open to participating, resulting in missed opportunities for important connections.

OUR EXPERIENCES

- Some of us never participated in family finding during our time in care.
- We were unaware of family finding or that it was an option for us.
- We did not understand what family finding was; we thought it meant finding siblings who were adopted—even after we were told about the process and engaged in it.
- When we were engaged in the family finding process, we felt more emphasis was put on connecting to adults who could provide stable housing and less on people who could support us in other ways.
- We were not provided with emotional or logistical support to connect with relatives who were identified during the process.
- We did not receive emotional support to maintain these connections.



Many of us are aging out or have aged out of care without any supportive adults in our lives.

We were not supported to build or maintain connections with adults, especially not with people who could not provide placement or legal permanency.

BEST PRACTICES

- Engage in family finding the moment a child enters care and at least once a year to ensure youth have supportive, life-long connections with family and kin.
- Explain the purpose of family finding and how it fits with locating other resources, including kin.
- Explain the types of actions that can be taken once family or kin are identified.
- Work with youth to make a list of people who are important to them and revisit and add to this list frequently.
- Assist youth with contacting kin who they say are important to them.
- Take advantage of technology to locate family and kin.
- Help youth make good decisions about the relationships they develop with family and kin, and help them identify healthy relationships.
- Help youth develop a strong network of several supportive adults. Be supportive of youth who develop relationships with kin and family, even if they do not lead to placement or legal permanency.

The appendix includes scenarios and prompts that show what family finding can look like for a family finding social worker and a youth working together.

DID YOU KNOW

The Affordable Care Act made youth who were in foster care at age 18 or older eligible for Medicaid until age 26. Learn more at <https://at.jlc.org/medicaid-FAQ>.

The law requires the agency to work with the youth to develop a transition plan before they leave care at age 18 or older. This should at least include plans for housing, employment, education, health, and connections with supportive adults. The plan must be approved by the court before discharge.

When leaving care at age 18 or older, youth must be provided with the following documents: birth certificate, social security card, state identification card/driver's license, health insurance information, medical record, and documentation of the time youth spent in foster care. 42 U.S.C.A. § 675(5)(I).

Tool 7: Creating a Comprehensive Transition Plan That Includes Connections with Services and Resources

ALL youth need supports to transition into adulthood successfully. One of the most crucial supports are caring adults who provide moral and other resource support. However, when youth do not have some of their most basic needs met, it is hard for them to maintain supportive relationships and to work on goals because their time is consumed surviving and making ends meet.

Making sure we have the items and services listed below before we leave care will help us be successful.

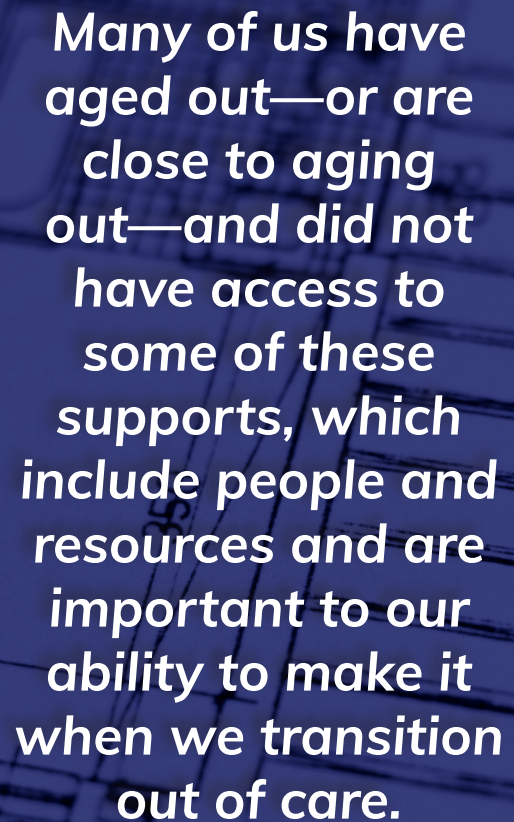
I. Mental Health Services

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Young people need to have access to comprehensive mental health support. Many of us have experienced trauma and need support to address it. Our experience with treatment was sometimes difficult, but many of us need help finding treatment and being supported during treatment. When we need treatment and do not receive it, we struggle to achieve many of our goals, including forming supportive connections. By helping us access treatment, you will be helping us get ready for permanency.

BEST PRACTICES

- Talk to youth about the importance and value of treatment.
- Connect them to comprehensive mental health treatment.
- Help them understand and manage their emotional and mental health.
- Help them explore non-traditional ways of addressing emotions, like getting involved in activities and hobbies or learning meditation.
- Teach youth about their prescriptions and how to manage and administer them.
- While developing a plan with youth, teach them how to schedule, find, and access mental health services.



Many of us have aged out—or are close to aging out—and did not have access to some of these supports, which include people and resources and are important to our ability to make it when we transition out of care.

- Teach youth about their right to services, including confidentiality and HIPPA
- Help youth find the therapist and treatment that are a good match for us, even if it's not the right fit on the first try.
- Look past behavior and understand that sometimes youth act certain ways because of being hurt.

II. Health Insurance Coverage

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Having health insurance is important for youth to access important services for physical, mental, and emotional health. When youth are healthy, they are better positioned to talk about permanency and maintain supportive relationships.

BEST PRACTICES

- Help youth understand that they are eligible for Medicaid until age 26 if they were in foster care at age 18 and that they should be enrolled in Medicaid as a former foster youth before aging out of care.
- if youth left foster care before reaching age 18, help them get assistance to apply for Medicaid or other health insurance as part of their transition plan.
- Assist youth to secure and maintain any public benefits they may be eligible for, such as SSI and food stamps, prior to exiting care—those will help meet their basic needs and maintain their health.

III. A Comprehensive Housing Plan

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Too many young people become homeless when they age out of care, and this gets in the way of building a successful future. If youth do not have a safe place to live, it is hard for them to have stability. Having a detailed and realistic housing plan will prevent youth from becoming homeless. Having stable housing is an essential element of achieving permanency.

BEST PRACTICES

- Work with youth as early as possible to develop a transition plan with several housing options.
- Help youth understand and be realistic about all the costs involved in living on their own.
- Help youth develop skills and credentials so that they have the income they need

to maintain and afford stable housing when they leave care. If they are making minimum wage, it may be hard for them to afford rent in most cities.

- If youth are attending college, make sure they have a plan for housing during breaks or between semesters.
- Work with youth to understand different options for stable housing, like roommates or living with family.
- Teach and work with youth to review and understand leases and tenant's rights.
- Refer youth to programs to help pay rent or make housing affordable.
- Help youth to understand the realities of affordable housing, including how public housing and other subsidy programs work.
- Assist youth in developing and learning daily living skills to manage their apartment or housing.
- Make sure youth are aware of extended foster care and aftercare and how it can help with meeting housing needs.
- Help youth to build a good transition plan and make sure that no youth leaves care and becomes homeless.

DID YOU KNOW

The Permanency Pact is a tool that can be used by youth in foster care and supportive adults to help establish permanency and a support network. It provides a way to formalize the relationship and identify expectations. Read more at <http://bit.ly/2E2F7jk>.

Youth are already looking for family, so professionals need to get up to speed. Include youth in the process of connecting with family, kin, and caring adults so youth understand the processes and feel comfortable with the steps being taken.

Pennsylvania law requires that family finding be conducted annually until a youth leaves care. If APPLA is the goal, agency must document its efforts to utilize search technology to find biological family members for the child. 62 P.S. § 1302.1 & 42 Pa. C.S.A. 6351 (f.1)(5).

IV. Vital Records

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Having vital records (birth certificate, state ID and driver's license, social security card, and proof of valid citizenship status) is essential to access education, physical and mental healthcare, employment, and more. Physically having these documents in care and as they transition out, better equips youth to secure employment and other essentials for a successful transition into adulthood.

BEST PRACTICES

- Make sure youth understand the child welfare agency's obligation to provide vital documents before they leave care at age 18 or older; and help them raise this issue in planning meetings and in court.
- Teach youth the importance of these documents and how to request them if they are needed in the future.
- Make sure youth and their children have a safe place to store documents, including electronically.

APPENDIX: FAMILY FINDING SCENARIOS

Introduction

Family Finding is not always easy—sometimes youth need assistance identifying supportive adults and help maintaining connections with those adults. Tool 6: Meaningfully Engaging Youth in Family Finding, explains some of the challenges we faced during our own Family Finding processes and outlines best practices for engaging youth in that process.

Family Finding should be a collaborative process with youth and caseworkers (or the person designated to complete family finding); and youth should be involved at every step.

The following scenarios show how youth should be engaged in the process, and how the case worker and youth can work together to come up with the best possible outreach plan. These scenarios were also designed to help youth understand the process, to foster collaboration between the youth and case worker, and ensure the process is based on the youth's interests.

Use the scenarios and prompts when you are working with a youth to reach out to a supportive adult or family member. The goal is to create the ideal situation for reaching out. Create a script, including as many steps and details as possible, and role play the best scenario. We suggest doing these at the beginning of the Family Finding process or at the specific stages when these scenarios are most relevant.

Scenario 1: Adult Family Member, Frank

Frank is the youth's uncle on their mother's side and lives in Ohio. How would you work with the youth to reach out to Frank?

PHASE 1: REACHING OUT TO FRANK

Ask the youth:

- Should we call Frank, or if provided, send him an email?
- Who should complete the first call? Would you like to and is that the best plan?
- Should I (the caseworker) to make the first call or point of contact?
- If I called, how would you like me to describe why I am calling?
- Do you want me (the caseworker) to leave Frank a voicemail?
- Should the first contact be a brief introduction?

PHASE 2: FRANK IS INTERESTED IN AN INITIAL CONNECTION

Ask the youth:

- If Frank is interested in connecting, how do you want to proceed with him?
- Should I (the caseworker) ask what he can provide?
- Should I ask Frank if you can live with him?
- Would you like me to set up in-person meetings or additional calls so you can get to know Frank better?
- Do you want to set up these meetings and calls yourself?

PHASE 3: MAINTAINING THE CONNECTION

What Frank can do to support the youth affects how you both will proceed with maintaining the connection with him.

Ask the youth:

- How do you want to proceed in maintaining a connection to Frank? Please be as detailed as possible. For example, do you want me to set up virtual or in-person meetings?
- How do you want to define what the relationship with Frank is?
- If you can live with Frank, how can they begin to build the relationship before the youth leaves to stay with them?
- If you cannot live with Frank, do you want to build a relationship with Frank so that he can be a support for you?
- What would you like me to do to help you build a relationship?

Alternative Scenario: If Frank is not interested in connecting, how should we proceed?

As the case worker, consider how the youth will feel and the best way to share this information.

Scenario 2: Older Sibling, Iman

Iman (identify sibling's pronouns) is the youth's older sibling. They live in Delaware county, and the youth has not seen them since they were separated as children. How would you work with the youth to reach out to Iman?

PHASE 1: REACHING OUT TO IMAN

Ask the youth:

- Would you like me (the caseworker) to call Iman, or if provided, send an email or message on Facebook?
- Should I leave a voicemail?
- Or, if you would like to call, how would you describe why you all are calling?
- Would this just be a brief introduction?

PHASE 2: IMAN IS INTERESTED IN AN INITIAL CONNECTION

Ask the youth:

- What is the best way for you to connect with Iman?
- How do you want to proceed with getting to knowing your sibling?
- Should you be the one to call the next time?
- Would you like me to set up meetings or additional calls to get to know Iman better again? Or, do you want to set up meetings and calls yourself?
- Should we ask what Iman can provide?
- Should one of us ask if youth can live with Iman?

PHASE 3: MAINTAINING THE CONNECTION

What Iman can do to support the youth affects how youth both will proceed in maintaining the connection.

Ask the youth:

- How do you want to proceed in maintaining a connection to Iman? Please be as detailed as possible. For example, do you want me to set up virtual and in-person meetings?
- How do you want to define what the relationship is?
- If the you can live with Iman, how do you want to build the relationship before you stay with Iman?
- If you cannot live with Iman, do you want to build a relationship so that they can be a a support for you?
- What would you like me to do to help you build a relationship?

Alternative Scenario: If Iman is not interested in connecting further, how should we proceed next?

As the case worker consider how the youth will feel and the best way to share this information.

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