



Recommendations of Youth and Young Adults  
from the 2008 National Convening on Youth Permanence

*Families  
for Life*

*Powerful, Possible, and a Priority for Youth in Foster Care*  
Sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation/Casey Family Services and Casey Family Programs

Future

UNCONDITIONAL

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## PURPOSE

Does everyone deserve a forever family? Do teens and young adults desire a forever family? Which permanency option is best for youth? How do young people define permanence? These were some of the questions asked by over 30 youth and young adults who attended the 2008 National Convening on Youth Permanence, all with a desire to share their experiences about the foster care system. An impromptu session was convened by the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family Youth Engagement Team at the request of the young people to allow these experts to meet and expand the discussion of their ideas and experiences around permanence. Their life experiences can help reshape, redefine, and renew efforts to achieve permanence for youth.

This summary shares their messages and encourages participants from the Convening to feel their experiences, hear their recommendations, and make permanence a reality for all youth and young adults.

Resilient

Empowerment





## EXPERIENCES

Youth and young adult participants reported that while the states are different, the rules are different, and the details are different, many of their experiences remain the same: A majority of the youth in attendance reported negative experiences in efforts to achieve permanence. While their stories are all different, their outcomes appeared to be similar: Child welfare agencies had not assisted them in achieving permanence.

**DRE (ARKANSAS)  
SAYS HE TRIED  
REUNIFICATION,  
GUARDIANSHIP,  
AND ADOPTION...  
ALL OF  
THEM FAILED.**

While the initial thought among participants was “permanence does *not* work,” with further discussion, they agreed it can and does work. Yet the child welfare system did not make it work for them. The group then discovered a more accurate statement: “We do not trust permanence.”

The young people discussed how their negative experiences with permanence led to their inability to trust both the concept and the process of permanency planning. One consistent theme was that the majority of the youth and alumni had not been engaged in the process of identifying viable permanent connections. As they engaged in an opportunity to self-select which permanency option was best for them, they considered the benefits and challenges of reunification, guardianship, adoption, and other.

The vast majority selected reunification, guardianship, or adoption. Only a few felt none of these options was good for them. While debriefing the activity, even the individuals who chose “other” were willing to select another option if they were integrally involved in the process.

All agreed that it is important to learn both from youth who have achieved and not achieved lasting permanency outcomes. These valuable experiences led to four simple and doable recommendations. They are as follows:

## RECOMMENDATIONS OF YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS



### ■ *Redefine Permanence to Include Emotional Connections*

When asked to define and describe permanence in one word, youth shared incredible responses from consistency to covenant, normalcy to never alone, intentional to unconditional.

Conversations with youth who attended the Convening revealed that there are both a lack of clarity and inconsistent messages around the true definition of permanence. This confusion seems to be further fueled by misinformation received from agency staff, upon which youth must rely for information. This may be due partly to the fact that staff are unclear about how to define permanence, both for themselves and especially for the youth.

Youth recommended that each agency closely examine its current definition of permanence, priorities around meeting its goals, and work in partnership with youth and staff to develop a clear working definition that not only encompasses the legal but also the emotional aspects of permanence. Agencies may choose to do so by looking at current popular definitions for inspiration and as a guide.

**ADAM (KANSAS)** was very poetic when he reminded us that we were at a permanency conference and virtually none of the young adults had achieved permanence and none either really understood or agreed with the definition of permanence.

### ■ *Involve Youth in Convening Planning*

To ensure the needs of youth and alumni are met during the Convening, it is imperative that an organization that values youth input and supports youth development engage young people not only in the Convening, but also in the planning of the Convening. Therefore, steps should be taken to diversify the planning team to include a substantial amount of youth input so that the conference agenda and programming will more accurately reflect the organization's resolve to support youth engagement. One alumnus mentioned how important it was to allow young adults to get together and share their experiences around the culture of foster care.

**JULIE (WASHINGTON)** said, "A youth track would be so important for this conference to promote permanence to older youth who feel like it's too late for them."

**BLAKE (HAWAII)**  
**SUGGESTS**  
**HAVING A**  
**PERMANENCY**  
**CONVENING**  
**PLANNED AND**  
**IMPLEMENTED BY**  
**AND FOR YOUTH**  
**AND ALUMNI.**





▪ *Address the Disparities in Permanency Outcomes for Older Youth and Youth of Color.*

**ONE YOUTH  
(CALIFORNIA) SAYS,  
“WHEN I WAS  
YOUNGER, I SAW  
A LOT OF WHITE  
KIDS AROUND ME  
BEING ADOPTED...  
NO ONE EVER  
ADOPTED ME...  
IT MADE ME  
FEEL BAD ABOUT  
MY COLOR.”**

Youth participants reflected on the impact of racial disproportionality as seen most vividly in its direct influence on disparities in positive permanency outcomes for youth of color. They reflected as well on disparities in permanency outcomes for older youth and young adults. They discussed the experiences shared by the Convening’s young adult plenary session and concluded that, while it was clear through their testimonies that each young adult was able to secure some sense of permanence, they did so primarily on their own. It was particularly moving that one participant, a 15-year-old African-American youth, was forced to choose between permanence with a relative and remaining in her current school. Youth commented that this panel – whether intentional or not – bore testimony to what has been happening on a national scale: too many older youth and youth of color are allowed to languish in long-term foster care without ever being connected to a forever family.

Youth and young adult participants recommended that as states/jurisdictions embark on their work around racial disparity, they pay close attention to the specific implications it bears on permanency outcomes and take deliberate steps to resolve existing disparities in positive permanency outcomes for both young adults and youth of color.

**KWANMAY (MARYLAND)** asked, “I play football and I’m going to college; why wasn’t adoption an option for me?”

▪ *Continue Permanency Search Beyond Emancipation*

While this recommendation may seem an unconventional concept to the child welfare field, it was a core point for the young adults at the Convening. Their desire to be connected to and supported by individuals and communities resounded loud and clear, especially as the young people transitioned out of foster care. Independent living services are no substitute for permanence and the young people were adamant about their need to feel supported and loved as they embark on their adult lives.

This group of young adults shared their struggles to develop and maintain positive and permanent connections while in care – struggles which only amplified at age 18 when the services and supports provided by the child welfare system often cease. They recommended that agencies become deliberate about expanding family finding, reunification, adoption, and other permanency efforts beyond the time a youth formally exits the system.

**ONE YOUTH (OHIO)** said, “You’re never too old for a family.”

**SUMMARY** ■ Youth and young adults addressed participants at the Convening’s closing session. They challenged professionals as they move forward in their respective roles and agencies to not only consider the recommendations offered here but also to elicit even more feedback from the young adults in their care who possess just as much knowledge, passion, and expertise as those who attended the Convening.

And finally, they reminded Convening participants that all are working with a unified goal: to ensure the safety, well-being, and permanence of the children and youth they serve. It was their hope that by listening to youth, the real experts on foster care, child welfare systems can only increase their chances of getting it right!

**YOUNG MAN  
(CONNECTICUT) SAYS,  
“I NEVER REALIZED  
HOW MUCH I  
NEEDED A FATHER  
UNTIL I BECAME  
A DAD. BY THAT  
TIME I WAS AGE 19  
AND NOBODY  
CARED ANYMORE.”**

**MERLI (NEW YORK CITY) “IT FUELED THE FIRE IN MY HEART TO KNOW THAT ONE DAY, FINDING A FOREVER FAMILY WHO CAN PROVIDE UNCONDITIONAL LOVE, A SENSE OF NORMALCY, AND HAPPINESS TO YOUR LIFE WILL NO LONGER BE JUST LUCK – IT WILL BECOME THE STANDARD OF FOSTER CARE.”**