



FACT SHEET THREE: PRACTICE STRATEGIES FOR FAMILY PERMANENCE

Young people in foster care, especially those at risk of aging out, face daunting challenges. For many, being disconnected from family, or being without it, is the most pressing.

To thrive, young people need *families plus*: families *plus* effective preparation for adulthood, including life skills development; a strong education coupled with job readiness and career planning; and access to housing and healthcare.

If we want to improve outcomes for young people at risk of aging out, we must keep them out of foster care when we can, and connect them with families when they have none. For youth with existing but troubled family relationships, we must help to build family connections strong enough to serve as lifelong supports.

HYPOTHESIS: STRENGTHEN FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS, IMPROVE OUTCOMES

Improving outcomes for youth on the verge of adulthood requires social work practice strategies that emphasize family relationships and recognize the effects poverty and discrimination have on parenting.

Several strategies that strengthen family relationships are worth testing to see if they can keep young people from being stalled in foster care, running away, or aging out without family connections. These strategies guide the work at the Annie E. Casey Foundation and its direct service agency, Casey Family Services; Casey Family Programs; and the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. Other agencies and states also are using these approaches to connect youth with family.

As a result, we've come to believe in the promise of these permanency strategies:

- *Involving young people in their own case planning and decision making.* A commitment to “Nothing about us, without us.” Young people need to be involved in – not protected from – their own case planning, starting on the first day they are brought into care.
- *Reconsidering the role of birth family.* Families matter to young people in foster care. Increasingly, child welfare practice is focusing on providing supports that enable families to remain together; involving family in planning with a young person, even if parents can't take care of that young person full time; engaging in ambitious searches for missing family and caring adults at the outset of a case; attending to a young person's need to sort out family relationships, even after they leave foster care; reconsidering the effects of terminating parental rights; and prioritizing placement with kin whenever possible, and with supports as needed.
- *Teaming to strengthen or build permanent family relationships.* Teaming for permanence is an approach that focuses on a young person's short- and long-term needs for safety, well-being, and *family plus* (family plus relationships, preparation for adulthood, and other services). These needs become the focus of an ongoing group planning and decision-making process that includes the young person, professionals, family members, and adults he or she has identified as important.
- *Building strong partnerships with the courts.* Court processes and judicial decision making must address teens' and families' need for adequate legal representation; provide a voice for youth in their own court proceedings; allow multiple pathways for decision making, including mediation and other alternative dispute methods; and test new approaches to speed good permanency decision making.

EXAMPLES OF PROMISING STRATEGIES AT WORK

For a fuller discussion of permanency practice strategies, background on these strategies, and examples of where they are working, see *Young People Need Families: Practice Strategies To Make Permanence a Priority* (available online at www.youthpermanence.org/materials). Some examples from that publication:

- *Involving Minnesota youth in their own planning.* The Minnesota Homecoming Project engages youth age 13 to age 17 in identifying and achieving their permanency outcomes. Youth develop their own recruitment plans for locating adoptive families, with increasing success each year since the project began in 2004.
- *Reconsidering birth family in New York.* Realizing Open Adoption Dreams, a program sponsored by the New York Council on Adoptable Children, helps young people in the process of adoption maintain existing family and other relationships.
- *Teaming to build family relationships in Maine.* By instituting teaming as a primary permanency strategy, Maine has reduced the number of young people in residential facilities from 770 in 2004 to 465 in 2006.
- *Pennsylvania enhances legal services to advance permanency.* Pennsylvania's Legal Services Initiative uses paralegals to speed child welfare cases through the courts. Staff members undertake ambitious family searches and aid attorneys in a variety of ways to reduce the amount of time young people's cases are under court jurisdiction.