

Series: Pursuing Permanency

Post 4: Preparing Youth for Permanency

If you would like to share what your organization is doing on permanency or have questions or a particular permanency focus/subject you wish to see a post on, please email Natalie Goodnow at NGoodnow@lutheranservices.org.

What challenges might arise when trying to help a youth achieve permanency, and how can they be overcome? This post looks at how to prepare youth for permanency, whether that means helping them consider the benefits of options other than independent living, unpacking their hesitation about adoption or guardianship, or working to resolve trauma that might create challenges in achieving permanency. As the bulletin "[Preparing Children and Youth for Adoption or Other Family Permanency](#)" from the Children's Bureau notes, "Assessment of children's readiness for a new permanent family generally focuses on their behavior in foster care, with input from social workers and mental health professionals. *Decisions are based on the assumption that children will accept new homes and families once they understand that it is unsafe for them to live at home.*"¹ It argues that this is insufficient and more needs to be done to prepare children and youth for "relational and/or legal permanency."

In addition to effectively communicating what permanency entails, there are many ways to help youth have the most smooth and meaningful move to permanency possible. With almost 47,000 children re-entering foster care in 2013, there is clearly a need to better prepare both families and youth so that permanency placements can be as successful as possible.²

Why Preparing Youth Matters

Working to make sure that youth not only find a permanent placement, but also that the permanency outcome is actually permanent so youth do not re-enter care is incredibly important. The Children's Bureau [bulletin](#) makes an important observation regarding preparation for permanency:

"From the time that children and youth are removed from family care, they face numerous emotional stressors as they adjust to their ever-changing status: for example, foster child, dependent child, former adopted person, delinquent, and various diagnostic labels, among others. They are challenged by new surroundings and must come to some level of understanding of what happened to them, as well as affirm their own identity and allow themselves to create new relationships and redefine existing ones without protective adult relationships to support and guide them.

"Achieving permanency is not just an **outcome** for these children and youth; it is a **process**. Whatever their legal status may be, at all ages, they are most interested in the relational permanency that they can find, create, maintain, or develop in the safety of a parent-child relationship. Ensuring that children and youth are ready for relational and/or legal permanency, in what has proven to them to be a world that offers little stability, is a critical step."

¹ https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/preparing_youth.pdf

² I ran the numbers from state data from the Children's Bureau on child welfare outcomes: <http://goo.gl/7kNakc>
These numbers don't separate out reunifications from adoptions or the ages of children re-entering.

Barriers to Permanency and Ways to Prepare Youth for Permanency

There are many ways to tackle the barriers that can prevent permanency or make it more difficult to achieve. While there are ways to engage a child’s biological family to help with this process (such as recruiting them to find another home for the child, and giving “permission” to the child to embrace a new home) or the adoptive family, this portion will look solely at actions that work with youth.

AdoptUSKids has an excellent resource on helping prospective families and youth prepare for permanency titled, “[Increasing Your Agency’s Capacity to Respond to Prospective Parents and Prepare Older Youth for Adopt.](#)”³ Their strategies to help older youth consider adoption are laid out below.

Youth’s Perspective	Strategies to Help Youth be Open to Adoption
<p><i>They may not understand what adoption is.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spend time talking candidly about what adoption means for a youth in terms that they can understand. Many youth hear the word adoption and think that means they will be placed with an adoptive family and will have to forget about their biological family. • Train and provide tools to foster parents to use in having ongoing conversations with youth about what adoption means. • Provide opportunities for youth in foster care to speak with other youth who have been adopted about what happens during and after the adoption process.
<p><i>They may not believe anyone would want to adopt them and lack hope in being adopted because of their age, history of behavioral issues, or being part of a sibling group.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share case examples about youth who have been adopted in the area and who are of the same age. • Provide opportunities for youth to talk with prospective adoptive parents who are interested in adopting older youth. • Share statistical information about youth who have been adopted in terms the youth can understand and that explain the numbers and characteristics of older youth who have been adopted.
<p><i>They may feel there is a chance they can return home and that saying “yes” would prevent</i></p>	

³ <https://dciw4f53l7k9i.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/going-beyond-recruitment-for-14-to-16-year-oldsChauncey.pdf>

them from ever being able to think or contact their biological family.

- Provide youth with accurate and ongoing information on their birth families while also acknowledging and respecting the loyalty they may feel towards birth families.
- Concurrent with other recruitment efforts, discuss with youth whether they have any extended family members who might be able to provide permanency.
- Explain that in some situations youth are able to maintain contact with their birth family after being adopted.

They may feel disloyal to their birth family by considering adoption and calling someone else “mom” or “dad.”

- Coach the birth family and foster family on how to help a youth understand that they have permission and support to consider adoption.
- Explore with youth how the agency can help them maintain their loyalty in various ways. This can include helping the youth to maintain connections with relatives when possible, and talking openly with adoptive parents about their birth family and desire to honor those relationships.
- Explain that youth may choose to refer to their new adoptive parents as something other than “mom” or “dad.”

They may worry about changing their last name.

- Help youth understand that in some adoptions they are able to keep their last name.

They may fear being separated or losing contact with siblings.

- Explain that in many adoptions, siblings are placed together or are able to stay connected even if they aren’t placed together.
- Explore and discuss with youth ways they can safely maintain connections with their siblings, such as through planned visitation, celebrating special occasions, and communication through cards, email, phone calls, and texting.
- Provide examples of how other sibling groups have stayed connected and opportunities to talk with youth and adoptive parents who have been able to maintain connections with a youth’s siblings.

They may be concerned about leaving everything that is familiar to them by being placed in another town or state.

- Provide details about the recruitment process and involve youth in the recruitment of a family by having them identify potential permanent connections from people they already know.
- Share with youth detailed information about specific prospective adoptive families, including where the families live, what the families' interests are, and how the families could be a good match for them.

It is also important to help youth and parents (foster, adoptive, or biological) understand how trauma has affected them and manifests itself both internally and externally. Arming youth with knowledge about themselves will assist on the path to healing. The Jim Casey Initiative has a [brief on trauma-informed practice](#) for youth in foster care.⁴ It notes the deep impact trauma leaves on a child:

“When a child experiences stress, the body’s stress response system is activated and produces physiological changes in the body and the brain. Some forms of stress are positive or tolerable and contribute to children’s ability to develop coping skills throughout their lifetimes. *When a young child’s stress response systems are activated within an environment of supportive relationships with adults, these physiological effects are buffered and brought back down to baseline.* Traumatic events can cause stress levels to move past a tolerable level and become toxic, potentially causing physical and long lasting damage to the developing brain. Responsive relationships with caring adults can mediate toxic stress exposure; otherwise, the stress can lead to physical and mental health problems that could last well into the adult years.⁵ . . . *The Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study found rates of PTSD in young people formerly in foster care to be more than twice that of U.S. war veterans.*^{15”}

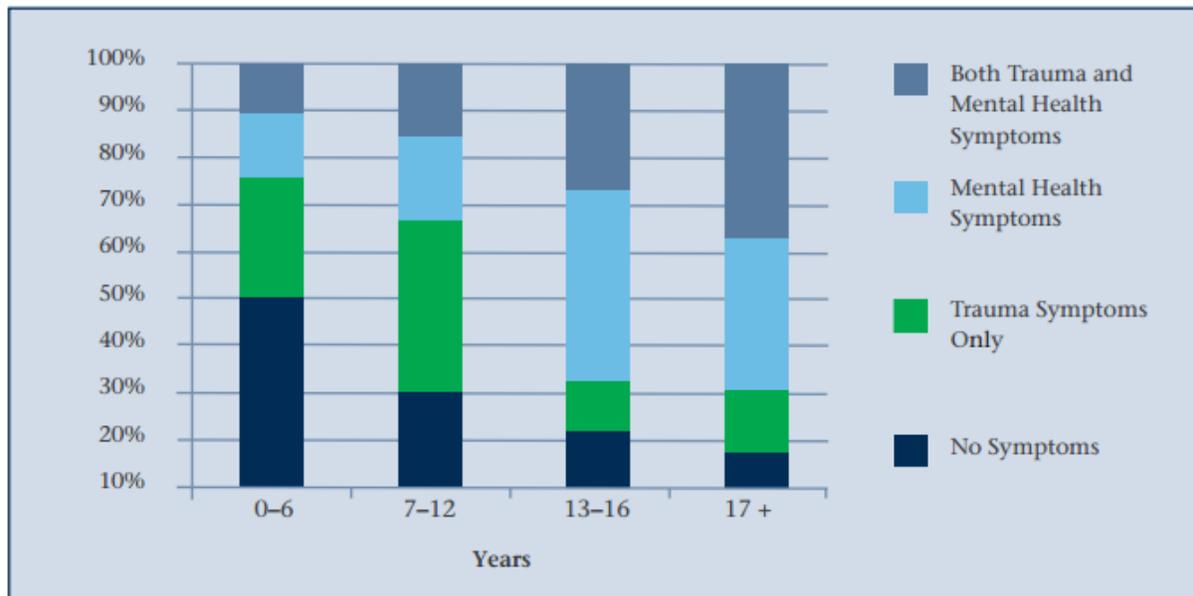
The below graphics from the [Casey brief](#) provides more details and demonstrates the greater impact on older youth.

TABLE 1. ADOLESCENTS' REACTIONS TO TRAUMA		
INTERNALIZING REACTIONS		EXTERNALIZING REACTIONS
Emotional numbing	Somatic complaints	Interpersonal conflicts
Avoidance of stimuli	Sleep disturbances	Aggressive responses
Flashbacks and nightmares	Academic or vocational decline	School refusal or avoidance
Confusion	Suicidal thoughts	Substance abuse
Depression	Guilt	Antisocial behavior
Withdrawal and isolation	Revenge fantasies	

Sources: Adapted from Perry, et al., 1995; Perry & Pollard, 1998; Perry, 2009.

⁴ <http://www.jimcaseyyouth.org/sites/default/files/documents/Issue%20Brief%20-%20Trauma%20Informed%20Practice.pdf>

FIGURE 3. PRESENCE OF TRAUMA AND MENTAL HEALTH SYMPTOMS IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN FOSTER CARE BY AGE



Source: Samuels, 2011.

The [paper](#) continues: “Trauma-informed services for young people in foster care can enable young people to move beyond functioning that is largely the result of unconscious processes focused on basic survival. In addition, trauma-informed services free young people to learn, develop, and build relationships with supportive and caring adults.¹⁹ These relationships serve as conduits for healing and growth and build a foundation for young people’s social capital²⁰ that supports them throughout their adult lives. . . . Young people need adults who can help them make sense of their histories with trauma. When physicians, educators, caregivers, legal advocates, and child welfare staff lack a basic understanding of trauma and development, they are unable to provide the environments young people need to heal and reach their full developmental potential.”

Here are five essential elements to trauma-informed care.

1. **“An understanding of trauma that includes an appreciation of its prevalence among young people in foster care and its common consequences.”**
2. **“Individualizing the young person.** Trauma-informed child welfare professionals work to understand the whole young person and not only his or her problems and concerns.”
3. **“Maximizing the young person’s sense of trust and safety.** Following traumatic events, a young person may continue to experience both physical and emotional insecurity. A sense of safety is critical for physical and emotional growth and functioning—both at home and within service settings.”
4. **“Assisting the young person in reducing overwhelming emotion.** Research confirms that trauma can result in such intense fear, anger, shame, and helplessness that young people feel overwhelmed by emotions.²⁴ Overwhelming emotions may delay the development of age-appropriate self-regulation.”
5. **“Strengths-based services.** Services do not only address trauma reactions—for which trauma-specific interventions may be needed—but also promote young people’s understandings of themselves, self-control, and skill building. Strengths-based child welfare practices build on the

belief that young people are doing their best given the challenges that they confront in the areas of support, stability, knowledge, and/or skills.”

Additional Resources

- [“The Adolescent Brain: New Research and Its Implications for Young Transitioning from Foster Care,”](#) from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative gives an excellent look at the effects of trauma and positive development opportunities on youth.
- From the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare comes the [Well-being Indicator Tool for Youth \(WIT-Y\)](#), which “was designed for youth aged 15-21 years who currently are in or in the past have had contact with the child welfare system.” The tool has three components: the assessment, which looks at eight indicators shown on the wheel below, the snapshot, which “gives youth a picture of their wellbeing based on the assessment,” and the blueprint, a planning document for youth to help improve their wellbeing.



- [“Unpacking the “NO” of Permanency for Older Adolescents,”](#) from the National Resources for Permanency and Family Connections is a great presentation on the subject.
- For more on engaging youth in their permanency process, please see Post 2 in the Pursuing Permanency Series: [“Engaging Youth.”](#)