



*Practice tips from the
Homecoming Project
for working with teens
under state guardianship.*

Finding adoptive families for teens

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In many respects, we succeed at removing children from dangerous environments only to put them in a different kind of harm's way.

We simply cannot make any child truly secure until we can ensure that he or she will again become part of a loving and lasting family—one that they know will be with them for life.

...permanence means establishing an enduring family relationship that is safe and meant to last a lifetime; offers legal rights and social status of full family membership; provides physical, emotional, social, cognitive, and spiritual well-being; assures lifelong connections to extended family, siblings, and other significant adults; and promotes an understanding about a family's racial and ethnic heritage and traditions.

- Annie E. Casey Foundation,
2007 KIDS COUNT Data Book

About The Homecoming Project

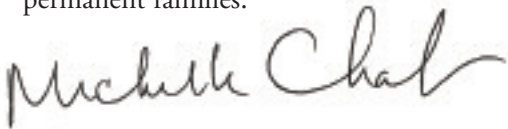
When a child comes into the child welfare system, the professionals responsible for making decisions that will forever affect this young person's life face a daunting task. When the child is a teen, the task can appear to be an impossible one. With The Homecoming Project, we took on the challenge of demonstrating that it is not. We challenged existing assumptions about teens and adoption.

Our project is just one of many around the country striving to improve permanency outcomes. While many other efforts take a wide view of permanency and work to connect youth with a committed adult prior to aging out of care, The Homecoming Project focused on identifying adoptive families for teens. Because our project worked with youth whose parents' legal rights were terminated, by court order, we really had no other option. But more importantly, we wanted to challenge the widely held assumption that teens are too old to be adopted.

Our project had two goals: to increase the number of adoptions of teens under Minnesota state guardianship and to assist teens in developing relationships with caring adults. To be successful, we knew we had to look beyond traditional adoption strategies. We needed to examine our beliefs and skills and to be open to applying a new set of priorities to our work.

We began with the understanding that each youth has a unique story and distinct relationships that guide the most logical permanency outcome for that individual. We also recognized the power of giving teens the opportunity to participate meaningfully in their own case planning. We saw how it instilled hope in them for their future, and opened up options to truly helping youth find their path out of a difficult childhood into a fulfilling adult life.

We have been relatively successful in Minnesota. We share our experience here with the hope that our success and learning can help and inspire other professionals in their work with teens awaiting permanent families.



Michelle Chalmers, MSW, LISW
Project Coordinator

Since the Adoption and Safe Families Act was passed in 1997, child welfare professionals have made significant strides in working toward timely permanency for children in foster care. Teenagers, however, have been largely left out of efforts to locate unconditionally committed adoptive families. As they get older, young people are more and more likely to remain in the child welfare system—in foster homes, group homes, residential treatment, or correctional facilities—until they age out of care.

The Homecoming Project, a Minnesota Department of Human Services initiative, funded through a federal adoption opportunities grant (#90-CO-0984), was developed in 2003 to focus on this often invisible population of teens in need of permanent families. The target population was adolescents ages 13 to 17 and their siblings of any age whose parents' rights had been terminated by the courts at least one year prior to referral to The Homecoming Project, and who had a permanency plan of adoption, but no family identified.

THE CASE FOR ADOPTION

TEENS UNDER STATE GUARDIANSHIP

According to the National Foster Care and Adoption Reporting System (AFCARS), on September 30, 2006, there were an estimated 510,000 children in foster care. Of these, more than 117,000 were “waiting children”—children who have a goal of adoption and whose parents’ rights have been terminated. However, the number of waiting children is probably significantly higher than this official number as children who are 16 years old or older and who have a permanency goal of aging out of care are excluded (AFCARS, 2008).

The fact that a large proportion of waiting teens are excluded from the official count illustrates, perhaps better than anything else, the degree to which this group of young people has been invisible to the child welfare system’s efforts to achieve permanency for youth under state guardianship.

Minnesota numbers

Between 2002 and 2007, the average number of children under state guardianship who reached age 18 and left care without a permanent family was 112 (Minnesota Child Welfare Report, 2007).

In 2007 alone, more than 500 additional youth aged out of care in Minnesota when youth whose parents’ retain legal rights are included in the count. All teens leaving foster care, whether or not they are under state guardianship, are likely to encounter similar challenges without concrete family support.

In 2007, 672 children under state guardianship were adopted. Of these, 106 youth were between the ages of 12 and 17. This is 16 percent of the total number of adoptions. This number has been steadily increasing over the past five years.

	Number of adoptions for state wards age 12-17	Percent of all adoptions
2002	76	12%
2003	77	11%
2004*	84	15%
2005*	97	13%
2006*	80	13%
2007*	106	16%

* The Homecoming Project was operating during 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2007.

“What I’d really like is a dad or big brother who’ll spend time with me, catching up on the ‘guy stuff’ that I’ve missed out on.”

– Ryan, 15

FOSTER CARE FALLS SHORT

There is little research on the long-term outcomes of youth who are adopted as teens. On the other hand, it is well established that youth who age out of foster care are significantly more likely than other youth to face life challenges related to their physical and emotional well-being.

Nationally, more than 26,000 youth aged out of foster care in 2006 (AFCARS, 2008). One of the largest studies of this population, conducted by the Chapin Hall Center for Children (Courtney and Dworsky, 2007), found:

- Eighteen percent of the youth interviewed had been homeless at least once since exiting foster care, and more than half of these youth had been homeless more than once.
- Seventy-one percent of the young women in the study reported having been pregnant, and 62 percent of these women had been pregnant more than once.
- Seventy-seven percent of the young men and 54 percent of the young women reported having been arrested at some point in their lives.

MYTHS PREVENT PROGRESS

There are many adults who play a role in making decisions that can result in positive permanency outcomes for teens. Similarly, adults involved in a youth’s case can impede permanency efforts if they do not have accurate, current information on permanency and the options available for a specific youth. Social workers, judges, attorneys, guardians ad litem, foster parents, group home or residential treatment staff, and youth themselves each have a critical role in decisions that will impact youth for their entire lifetime. Each member of the team must have access to information that explains clearly how critical permanency is for all people. And the team needs facts that will challenge the many myths that routinely obstruct permanency efforts.

Some of the most common myths include the belief that teens are too old to be adopted or that no families are interested in adopting teens. Well-intentioned professionals may believe it is not appropriate to pursue permanency for youth with attachment difficulties or in a residential treatment or correctional setting. Other myths include the belief that talking about permanency with a youth who is doing well in foster care will disrupt a good placement or that youth will have to sever ties with their birth family if they are adopted.

Financial myths are also abundant, including the idea that foster parents cannot afford to adopt or that a youth will miss out on free college if adopted. These myths, and others, will be addressed later in this publication.

In addition to myths about teens and permanency, there are also systemic and practice-level barriers that delay or prevent the successful transition and lifelong success of teens in adoptive families. These barriers include large caseloads, insufficient training and support of professionals and care providers, and inconsistent accountability and standards for acceptable practice across and within jurisdictions. In addition, the child welfare system’s services-delivery silos cause considerable challenges for meeting the needs of teens in the system.

MORE RESEARCH NEEDED

There is a significant need for comprehensive longitudinal studies of persons adopted from foster care as teens. While it makes intuitive sense that long-term outcomes for adopted teens would be better than outcomes of similar teens who did not join a permanent family, there is currently no research available to substantiate that assumption. Research is still needed on individual and community-level outcomes and the economic costs and benefits of teen adoption.

GETTING STARTED

COMPONENTS FOR SUCCESS

The Homecoming Project provides some insights into what contributes to the relatively low number of teens achieving permanency through adoption. Minnesota's challenges likely mirror those of other states, and do appear to be consistent with the ever-expanding literature generated on older youth permanency. Because Minnesota is a county-administered child welfare system, a youth's experience once child protection becomes involved in his or her life varies dramatically depending on where the youth lives. Statutes and best practices are applied with a greater or lesser degree of commitment from county to county, and practice varies widely between individual workers across Minnesota's 87 counties.

Everyday decisions regarding child welfare should be made in a deliberate way, intentionally supporting permanency. Youth will gain permanency only when all the adults involved in the case believe that it is possible and critically important.

Note: The Homecoming Project did not complete adoption home studies, but provided information and on-going support to families as they completed their training, and home study through a Minnesota public or private adoption agency. Project staff believe having the ability to offer comprehensive services, including completion of home studies, could have enhanced their work. However, the scope of work described here is the actual work completed.

BASIC BELIEFS FOR SUCCESS

In order for permanency efforts to be successful, all adults who are involved in the youth's case must share the following core beliefs:

- All youth and families have dignity and the right to participate in decisions made regarding their lives.
- Teens should be involved in their own permanency planning.
- Teens have a basic right to a safe, committed family.
- Teens are adoptable, and there are families who have the skills and desire to adopt teens.
- Teens are capable of navigating complex relationships. They can have positive relationships with both their birth family and adoptive family, if the adults support them.
- Change, including new approaches and new people, can be a good thing.
- Permanency is not a placement or an event. Permanency efforts require workers to take a long-term perspective on the youth's life.

COUNTERING MYTHS

Myths can impede or prevent permanency efforts if they are not addressed. Following is a list of common myths frequently believed by adults in the child welfare system. Beside each myth is a counter belief based on practice wisdom that can help teen adoption advocates strengthen their case in seeking permanency for youth.

MYTH

Teens are too old to be adopted.

It is impossible to find families for teens. There are no families interested in adopting teens.

Teens are too unstable.

The teen is doing well where he is. Adults should not disturb a good placement by bringing up adoption.

It is better not to raise teens' hopes for a family, because teens do not get adopted anyway.

A perfect match is necessary for the youth to have any chance of succeeding in a family.

Most teens are better off in group residential settings because being in a family is too hard for them, given their attachment problems.

Long-term foster care is basically the same as adoption if the parent(s) says the youth can stay there until he/she ages out.

Teens cannot be adopted because they often want to maintain birth family ties.

Youth will miss out on free college if they are adopted.

Teens are not ready to be involved in the adoption process. It is too big a decision to involve them.

Foster parents cannot afford to adopt.

COUNTER BELIEF

People do not outgrow their need for a family. People remain part of their families forever.

When families have an opportunity to interact with waiting teens, a significant number of them alter their idea of who they imagine adopting.

The real question is not whether the youth is ready to join a family, but whether the family is ready. Youth will rarely seem ready because healing and growth occur after they join a family. Residential treatment is an opportune time to build a relationship between youth and a prospective family, and may even increase the odds of successful treatment.

Living in a foster home means that the teen is able to live in a family setting and could probably be successful in adoption. If the youth is in a residential setting, the youth is guaranteed to eventually be discharged—essentially a disruption.

False hopefulness is better than false hopelessness. The hope for a family for a teen is not false—it is possible.

Every person involved in a match may not have the same idea of the characteristics of the perfect family for the youth. The reality is that perfect does not exist. The team (including the youth) should literally list what they are looking for in a family and then decide which items are negotiable and which are not.

The implication is that a youth with intense attachment issues cannot experience any benefit from family membership, and by extension, that the youth is unlikely to have intimate relationships in adulthood. The system cannot quit trying to help youth build relationship skills, as they are the foundation of virtually all components of a satisfying life.

A foster care relationship may be easily terminated by either party at any time. An adoption is a legal commitment to parenting a young person for his or her lifetime. There are many questions to help assess the degree to which the youth and foster family have a committed relationship. The worker should not be satisfied simply by hearing that the youth can remain in the home until age 18, or that he or she will be welcome to visit on holidays. In fact, these statements should concern all involved adults about how permanent the relationship really is.

Teens should not be expected to give up past or current connections. Families that are successful in adopting teens recognize that youth bring with them a long history of relationships and experiences. The families that are able to support their teen in managing relationships with other important adults experience much less difficulty related to conflicting loyalties.

When people speak about “free” college, they are usually referring to tuition waivers. However, these are not available to all youth or at every college and do not include other college expenses, such as room and board, books, fees, or transportation. In addition, new Federal legislation levels out the access to financial aid between youth who age out of foster care and youth who are adopted. Program staff should explore exactly what their particular state’s rules are on tuition waivers and other programs.

Participating in permanency efforts provides teens an opportunity to prepare for the possibility of joining a permanent family. It is important for teens to know that action is being taken to search for potential family resources. Subsequently, youth build greater trust in professionals when they see progress being made. Teens who are involved in their own recruitment process are better prepared to join adoptive families.

Foster parents can make better decisions about permanency if they have accurate information regarding their unique situation. Factors to consider are the teen’s age, level of care, and likely end date of the foster care payment. Workers should also provide foster parents with specific information on the adoption assistance payment for which the youth is likely to be eligible, including medical coverage and reimbursements for child care, camp, respite, etc. In addition, the federal adoption tax credit may be significant at tax time for many families.

“I had a very traumatic start to life and have struggled for a long time to find some balance and happiness. Right now, I don't have a lot of complaints and I'm happy with myself. This is something I have to work on every day.”

– Ashley, 15

THE ROLE OF THE PERMANENCY SPECIALIST

The primary role of the permanency specialist is to provide comprehensive child-specific recruitment efforts to support the work of county adoption social workers, who are ultimately responsible for achieving permanency goals. This includes the following activities:

- Consultation to counties, private agencies, tribes, and families regarding permanency in general and on specific cases.
- Outreach to prospective adoptive families. This includes being proactive and addressing challenges before they become crises. It might also include appropriate training and resource referrals.
- Proactive support to families and youth before and during transition, and continuing after finalization.
- Development and facilitation of opportunities for youth and adults to interact.
- Involvement of youth during recruitment, preparation, development, and transition. This includes frequent face-to-face contact and discussions of difficult issues like foster care, adoption, family, belonging, and the youth's past and future.
- Leadership to keep the team of professionals working toward the common goal of permanency.

In The Homecoming project model, when a new child-specific recruitment case begins, the permanency specialist is expected to see the youth in-person weekly for approximately six weeks. The intense contact up front helps build the relationship necessary for future work. In this model, permanency specialists are generally able to provide comprehensive services for seven to ten youth at a time, and also provide transition permanency placement support to an additional three to five families. If permanency specialists are doing both child-specific recruitment and completing home studies for families, the caseload sizes should be reduced.

Recruitment specialist positions work best as part of a team of workers with similar responsibilities. The intensity of the work requires opportunities for peer support, team building, case consultation, and resource sharing.

ESSENTIAL SKILLS AND TRAITS OF PERMANENCY SPECIALISTS

The permanency specialist has a critical role in the process. Individuals who will be most successful in this role will possess the following characteristics:

- Ability to work comfortably with youth, particularly teens, and families.

- Understanding of adoption and foster care systems and the range of permanency options.
- Creativity and an open mind when it comes to exploring potential family resources.
- Ability to talk with and actively hear youth speak about emotionally difficult topics.
- Knowledge of key resources available in the geographic area in which the youth will be living and related to the special interests or needs of the youth.
- Ability to listen attuned to permanency. When a youth mentions someone from his or her past, permanency specialists should be able to ask questions to see if that person might provide permanency for the youth or lead to someone who can help the youth in some way.
- Good sense of when to hurry and when to be patient. Every day a youth is waiting, there is an urgent need to recruit a family. Once a match is made, the youth and family need time to transition together. Patience and level-headedness are key during this phase.
- Endurance to stay on track, even when the youth gets scared or seems resistant. It is a natural part of the process for a youth to change his or her mind or become resistant to adoption efforts when it appears adoption might actually be possible or imminent.

THE PROCESS

NINE STEPS TO SUCCESS

The following nine steps outline major activities necessary for permanency specialists to help youth find adoptive families. Although the steps are numbered, it is important to note that this work is not simple or sequential. In fact, many of these tasks should occur simultaneously, or may happen in a different order depending on the individual circumstances of the youth.

STEP 1

Build a relationship with the youth

- Meet face-to-face with the youth. See the youth frequently and consistently in the beginning—weekly visits are ideal.
- Learn the youth's history, hopes, dreams, fears, behaviors, strengths, interests, important connections, and favorite things.
- Spend informal time together until you understand the youth's personality and concerns. At this stage, be cautious about approaching the topic of adoption.
- Get youth away from institutional settings into more socially natural ones when you meet together (e.g., go out for coffee, take a walk, shoot a game of pool, go for a car ride).

STEP 2

Build relationships with the team

In addition to the permanency specialist, the permanency team should include the youth and all professionals with an interest in permanency for the youth, such as adoption workers, other county workers, guardians ad litem, lawyers, probation officers, foster care licensors, therapists, residential program staff, pre-adoptive parents, home study workers, foster parents, mentors, and others. Develop written agreements about each person's role and responsibilities. Make a formal, specific plan for regular communication.

The following list highlights effective practices the permanency specialists can use in building relationships with:

The whole team

- Address myths and barriers and make a mutual agreement to address them when they become visible in attitude or practice.
- Plan a regular time and process for checking in by phone, email or in-person. Once a month is recommended.
- Clarify roles and make an agreement to hold each other accountable.

Important questions to ask workers, foster parents, and other professionals who resist permanency efforts:

- Is this youth likely to be named in someone's will?
- Who will she call when she moves into her first home and the furnace goes out in the middle of the night?
- If he graduates from a post-secondary program, who will attend the ceremony and host a celebration?
- If she is in an accident, who will the hospital call as an emergency contact?
- What happens when he is \$100 short on his rent?



Youth's adoption workers

- Work hard to communicate well. Both project staff and public agency staff report communication is the biggest challenge to effective teamwork when working on permanency efforts.
- Make clear agreements about the frequency of communication each player desires and the types of activities to be reported.
- When appropriate, send email about case activities simultaneously to all team members.
- Be open, honest, and humble in communications with public agency staff. Understand their role and responsibilities. Communicate hopefulness.

Other private agency staff

- Build relationships, not only with individual staff but also with entire agencies that provide services (such as home studies, training, crisis support and post-adoption support) that the youth and/or their adoptive parents might need.
- Be flexible, and help other agency staff identify ways to also be flexible.
- Work with agencies to help prospective parents identify potential support needs for as many contingencies as possible and to set those supports in place prior to placement.

Residential treatment and other facility staff

- Make sure the managers and front-line staff are familiar with adolescent permanency and the work to be done with the specific youth.
- Get to know the facility's care philosophy.
- Honor staff authority. If a youth is on a restrictive level, let the youth know you respect the facility's need to enforce its expectations and that you will work with staff to determine appropriate ways to meet the treatment center's goals and the youth's permanency planning goals until the youth has earned privileges back. However, be clear that you will not stop recruiting for or meeting with the youth. Permanency work is not a privilege.
- Inform staff that you expect and assume that they will honor your need to work with youth on the permanency plan. Involve facility directors and/or state staff as needed to explain or clarify the status of children under state guardianship and their unique needs to work on permanency planning even while in a more restrictive placement setting.
- Establish an agreement on what information will be shared between the residential program and the permanency specialist, how frequently, and in what manner. Make sure that all relevant people are on visiting and contact lists.

“I started saying to myself, ‘You might want a family. You might deserve a family.’”

— Jolene, 14

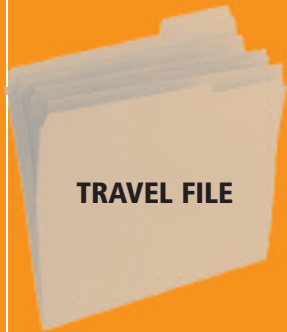
Foster parents

- Check in regularly. Let foster parents know what you and the youth have discussed or worked on. Agree on the level of communication they want, and honor the agreement. Some foster parents want to know everything that has been done, so they can discuss it with the youth or anticipate the need to help the youth think through difficult choices. Other foster parents prefer to maintain more distance from the permanency work.
- Be honest.
- Understand how your work with the youth is likely to have repercussions for the foster parent. There are three main issues that come up with foster parents:
 - Foster parents may want to adopt the youth but believe that they cannot afford to because of the decrease in financial assistance between foster care payments and adoption assistance. If this is a concern, go over the financial implications of adoption with the family. In the case of teen adoption, the difference between foster care and adoption may be minimal when factoring in the adoption tax credit. Each case is different and individualized attention and accurate answers can make foster parent adoption possible.
 - The job of being a foster parent usually becomes much more difficult when youth are struggling to manage all the emotions and questions that arise when workers begin to focus on permanency. Alerting foster parents to these potential issues and supporting them when the youth are having trouble or being difficult demonstrates that you are a team player and that you realize that there are behavioral implications from your work.
 - Foster parents often know the youth in their homes quite well and may have questions about the ability of others to adequately parent the youth.
- Some foster parents attempt to discourage youth from considering adoption. In such cases, make sure the foster parent, the youth and the youth’s social worker understand the long-term implications of a decision to leave the youth in a foster home until he or she ages out of care. Share research on outcomes for youth that emancipate from foster care and ask questions to encourage conversation about long-term commitment. For example, ask whether the foster parent intends to be a resource to the youth even after foster care payments, and make sure the youth understands what to expect if she or he stays in foster care until age 18.

OLIVIA’S STORY: FOSTER PARENTS BECAME ROADBLOCK TO ADOPTION

The Homecoming Project received a referral for 15-year-old Olivia, who had been under state guardianship for several years. When project staff began to work with Olivia’s foster family, the Robertsons, the worker discovered that the family considered themselves to be a “permanent foster care provider,” and were surprised to learn permanency efforts for Olivia were underway. The Robertsons did not believe there was any reason to pursue adoption for Olivia because they said she could stay there until she was 18. After the Robertsons talked with The Homecoming Project staff and Olivia’s county social worker, they reluctantly agreed to support the adoption decision, and consented to a meeting with Olivia’s prospective adoptive parents. However, the Robertsons continued to tell Olivia they didn’t see the need for her to move to an adoptive family now. During this period, the relationship between Olivia and her foster family deteriorated, as did Olivia’s behavior. After several months, the Robertsons decided the situation was not working and asked the county to find a new home for Olivia. In the meantime, the prospective adoptive parents had become discouraged and changed their mind about adopting Olivia. Olivia is still waiting for an adoptive family.

(Name and details changed to protect privacy.)



A travel file is a well-assembled packet of documents available to the social workers of prospective adoptive families. Redacted (de-identified) copies of the following items, when available, should be included in the travel file:

- Up-to-date child social and medical history, including when and why youth first entered care.
- Birth family strengths.
- Current psychological information, including diagnoses.
- Psychological evaluations and other special needs assessments.
- A list of medications, including dosage and purpose.
- School records, report cards, Individual Education Plans (IEP) including assessments and goals.
- Residential treatment center/group home/hospitalization discharge summary or current report.
- History of residential/day treatment.
- Information on birth family contact (relation to youth, frequency of contact, etc.).
- At least one guardian ad litem (GAL) report to court per year, preferably the last one of the year since it usually has a summary.
- At least one quarterly report to court per year, preferably the last one of the year since it usually has a summary.

STEP 3

Collect information from all possible sources

- Contact the referring worker and obtain information about the youth.
- Review the youth's child protection and guardianship case files. Search for information, documents, and photos that might be important in helping the youth learn about his or her own history. Use the file review time to gather information to assist in creating a book with the youth. Be sure to check data privacy practices to determine what can be copied and what should be summarized.
- Begin creating a travel file. This file should include important documents that will provide information for prospective families and will contribute to the permanency specialist's knowledge about the youth.

Step 4

Partner with youth to achieve permanency

- Engage in joint task-oriented activities together such as creating a life book or recruitment brochure. This helps to develop the relationship and demonstrates the worker's credibility as someone who not only asks for but also honors the youth's thoughts and wishes.
- Find answers to questions the youth might have about his or her birth family or permanency.
- Talk with the youth early about how much he or she would like to know about progress in family recruitment. Some youth want to know everything; others ask to only hear about potential families that are strong possibilities as matches. Most youth know what they can and cannot emotionally handle about the stages of family recruitment.
- Use social events to connect waiting youth with other waiting or recently adopted youth. This allows youth to prepare for adoption and learn from other youth about what to expect in the process.

LIFE BOOKS

A life book—the youth's personal story—is created by the youth with their permanency specialist or other adult. The process of making the book can help the youth gain insight into feelings associated with his or her past as well as current circumstances. Collecting and selecting items, learning details of the past, and discussing memories connects the youth to who they are and where they came from. For youth who have been removed from their birth families, life books may be the only place they can access their history.

The following information and documents may be included in a life book:

- Information about the youth, including his/her interests, personality, wishes, fears, and feelings about foster care and adoption.
- A timeline of major life events.
- Photos or a map of all the places the youth has lived.
- Reasons why the youth is not living with his or her birth family, both what he or she remembers and what is in the case file.
- Important people in the youth's life.
- People the youth misses.
- Awards, recognition certificates, and activity information for youth.
- School records and report cards.
- Photos.
- Letters from birth parents or other people important to the youth.

ASKING CRITICAL QUESTIONS TO ENGAGE YOUTH

Family connections that offer safety, stability, and security often already exist within a youth's network of relationships. In order to identify these connections, it may be helpful to engage youth in a discussion by asking them questions such as:

- Who took care of you when you were little and your parents could not?
- Where have you gone for holidays and/or special occasions? Who else was there?
- Who do you admire? Look up to? Want to be like someday?
- Who believes in you? Stands by you?
- Who can you count on? Who would you call if you were in trouble?
- Who would you call if you wanted to share good news? Bad news?

- adapted from the *Families for Kids Program, Children's Services of Roxbury, MA, 2002*

STEP 5

Identify and reach out to people within the youth's existing network

The purpose of contacting and meeting with the youth's support network is to learn more about the youth, to engage more people in permanency efforts, and to encourage contact and commitment on the part of the people currently in the youth's life. They are not necessarily pursued as prospective adoptive resources. Some steps to consider:

- Contact people identified by the youth as important. Engage the youth in a discussion to help them decide who should be on this list.
- Revisit prior kinship searches. Identify and contact people who may have been left out of the original search or who have not been contacted recently. Circumstances of relatives once ruled out may have changed.
- Get to know the people in the youth's support network and get them engaged in supporting permanency.

STEP 6

Locate a prospective family

Although the primary role of the permanency specialist is to work with the youth to prepare them for permanency, the worker should also be engaged in the process of identifying and developing relationships with families who might become adoptive resources.

The professional working with the family and the professional working with the youth must collaborate in a much more integrated way than the existing system design allows. The professional who will be providing on-going support for the family unit once the youth moves in must spend time building relationships with both the youth and the family. These relationships will enable them to respond effectively and to initiate meaningful support.

The Homecoming Project considered its primary function to be child-specific recruitment for youth. However, one lesson learned early in the project is that the term "child-specific recruitment" is often used to describe a role with a much narrower focus than what project staff envisioned for their work. Throughout the project, Homecoming staff were instrumental in each step of the adoption process including family recruitment, youth preparation, matching, and ongoing support.

Below are some tips to help staff recruit adoptive families:

- Conduct outreach in schools, places of worship, and in the broader community.
- Make use of personalized recruitment materials, created with the youth (brochures, videos, photos).
- Create intentional opportunities for waiting youth and waiting families to interact in shared learning environments.

“It would be fun to eat real food (that’s not been made in a cafeteria) and sleep in a bed that I can call my own. Or maybe have a snack without having to ask a staff to unlock it for me.”

– Erica, age 16

- Conduct media outreach profiling specific youth.
- Use existing adoption resources in your state or community.
- Regularly attend adoption orientations or pre-adoptive trainings to provide families with information about waiting teens.
- Engage in targeted outreach efforts in places that are likely to have families with skills or interests necessary for a specific youth. For example, it may be worthwhile to contact a professional association of American Sign Language interpreters for a child who is deaf or hard of hearing.
- Respond to inquiries from families, regardless of whether or not they have completed a home study.
- Personalize encounters with prospective adoptive families. When appropriate, meet in coffee shops or visit them at their home. Stay in regular contact, even if they are not likely to adopt a youth on your caseload. The goal is to develop families who are willing and prepared to adopt teens in general.
- Help prospective and adoptive parents establish a support network.
- Provide resources about teen adoption and successfully parenting teens. This information may be missing or limited in the standard materials distributed to pre-adoptive families.

STEP 7

Prepare the prospective family

- Understand that the child welfare system is confusing and often overwhelming. Give the family time to ask questions, repeatedly if needed.
- Give the family time to get to know the youth and for the youth to get to know the family.
- Once the decision is made that a family is committed to adopting a specific youth, social workers should do as much as possible to transfer decision-making authority to the parent(s). At a minimum, the pre-adoptive parents should be involved as a partner or team member in every decision regarding the youth (education, healthcare, therapy, etc.). Empowering parents in front of the youth demonstrates that workers trust that the parents are able to take good care of the youth. It is important for the teen to see that the workers who have been making decisions like and respect the adoptive parents. It is also important for the teen to see that being in a permanent family is different than being in foster care—that most of the time a social worker is not involved in family decisions.

MOST TEENS WILL FEEL AMBIVALENT ABOUT THE IDEA OF ADOPTION

Teens need information and reassurance in order to begin to believe adoption is possible and desirable.

Be prepared to address these questions and comments:

- Do I have to change my name, move schools, give up my friends?
- No one will want me.
- What is adoption?
- I already have a family and a mom.
- I don’t want to risk losing anyone else.
- I’ll be 18, grown and on my own soon. Why do I need a family?

WHEN A TEEN GETS SCARED

Once a family is identified and the reality of the placement begins to sink in, youth often begin expressing new and different fears. This is a normal part of the process. It is important for the worker to hear what the youth is trying to express and then to assess the situation. Is there something inappropriate or dangerous about the prospective home? Is the youth feeling guilty, scared, or unworthy? Once it is determined that there is no concerning safety issue, the role of adults is to help the youth and family to develop a plan to work through these emotions.

Some specific strategies that the Project has found helpful in managing ambivalence:

- Slowing down or speeding up the transition.
- Discussing household rules (which rules are negotiable and which rules are not).
- Addressing any questions the youth has about contact with friends or birth family.
- Addressing parental expectations about jobs, school, and clothing.
- Completing a safety plan.
- Assuring that all needed supports and services are in place prior to move-in.

Youth can be encouraged to:

- Journal about their thoughts and feelings and share them with a trusted adult.
- Write a letter to themselves on a day when they are feeling optimistic and hopeful about the match.
- Keep talking about feelings.

“Waiting for a family is like being a puppy in the free box.”

– Sam, age 15

- Stay in close touch with the family and keep asking them what they need. Support them and connect them to information and resources. Keep in mind that prospective parents may need resources about very basic things, including the Internet, social networking, and cell phones.
- In cases of youth who have proven challenging to match, consider recruiting potential resources as mentors first. This allows the mentor and the youth to get to know each other without the pressure of adoption. The mentor can then consider how they might become a long-term support resource, adoption or otherwise, if the relationship develops.

STEP 8

Preparing for the transition

- As the reality of a permanent home approaches, youth may become ambivalent and possibly even resistant to the idea of permanency. Difficult or extreme behaviors are common in the early weeks of placement. The team must be committed to fighting the inclination to remove a youth from a pre-adoptive home prior to well-coordinated, proactive, intensive efforts to stabilize and support the developing relationship. Crisis can be a key time for building attachment if it is handled creatively.

- Insist that needed services and supports be in place prior to move-in. This might include therapy; personal care attendant (PCA) services; school; respite care; crisis prevention plan; contact plan with siblings, birth parents and foster parents; basic rules and consequences; family’s support network; and foster care payments (if applicable).

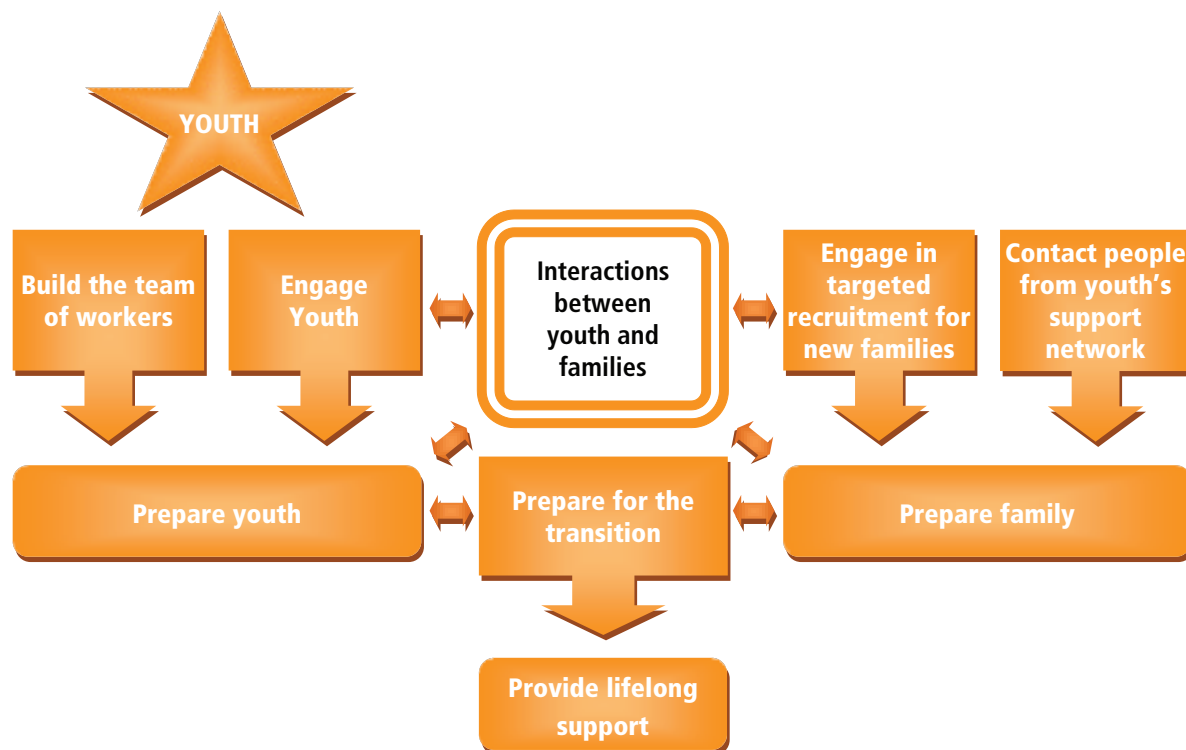
STEP 9

Support and retention

- Youth and parents need easy access to professionals experienced in adoption and attachment. Regular check-ins initiated by a professional help parents feel that they are not alone in managing the challenges they are likely to experience early in placement.
- The need for on-going support services may last years. There will be periods of greater and lesser intensity, but families and youth have to trust that someone will be there when the next challenge comes, even if it comes five years into the relationship.
- Invite youth and parents to take a leadership role in helping others learn about teen adoption. This will keep them connected to workers and families who care about the issue. When parents or youth have the opportunity to share their experience and learn with others, they will also process their experience and find additional meaning in it.

BUILDING COMMUNITY

In a traditional adoption model, waiting children and prospective adoptive parents have little interaction until a match is made and a child is placed in an adoptive family. The model utilized by The Homecoming Project encourages interaction between families and youth during all stages of the adoption process. The purpose of this interaction is not necessarily to “make a match,” although sometimes that is the outcome. The real purpose is to create a community of people including waiting youth, adopted youth, prospective families, and adoptive families. The community members share with each other, learn from one another, and provide support for each other. These interactions can take place at organized social events like parties, picnics, or other activities, or through adoption-focused events, such as youth panels. The important thing is that youth and families have opportunities to socialize with one another, share stories, and build community.



A LETTER TO THE HOMECOMING PROJECT FROM AN ADOPTIVE PARENT

“We are thrilled about Sarah!...We had the pleasure of having a phone conference with her therapist. The call solidified for us that we have made the right decision to have her join our family. It is so important for you and all adoption workers to know what things helped us reach this decision. It will hopefully help to encourage others to adopt special needs children, including teens. The combination of all data shared with us—both positive and negative—along with access to speak with her foster parents and therapist, input from the county and the guardian ad litem, and the genuine care and concern shown by all of you for her, her siblings, and foster family, played a major role in helping us feel comfortable, willing, and excited to move in this direction. We thank all of you for everything you have contributed and all we anticipate you will contribute in the future as the process moves forward. Had we only received partial information or noticed a small interest in the welfare of families throughout the process, we may not have reached what we believe is the right decision and God's plan for our family.”

(Name changed to protect privacy.)

KEVIN'S STORY: REALITY CAN BRING RESISTANCE

Thirteen-year-old Kevin was placed in an adoptive home, and all the necessary paperwork had been completed. However, in the months following his placement, Kevin regressed considerably. He began acting out in school and at home, and he even told his adoptive parents that he did not want to live with them anymore. Because of his behaviors, the adoption workers decided to move Kevin into residential treatment. His parents were very sad and concerned about Kevin and his future. However, they were also exhausted and feeling hopeless about parenting such a difficult youth. They finally told Kevin that they still wanted to be in his life, but they would wait for him to initiate contact. Considering his past history of family, the Homecoming staff argued that it was normal for Kevin to feel scared and vulnerable as he grew closer to his adoptive parents. However, they also contended that this could be a time of significant growth and healing if the adoptive parents were encouraged to remain involved in Kevin's life and provide him with continued support. The adoptive parents continue to meet with Kevin regularly and still consider him part of their family.

(Name and details changed to protect privacy.)

“Bottom line: I need the same thing everyone else does. I need a family who will love me, not give up on me, and accept me, even with the challenges that face me.”

– Craig, 13

ADVOCATING FOR SYSTEM CHANGE

“Business as usual” does not work

In the course of permanency work, professionals may find that despite their best efforts on an individual level, there are too many systemic barriers that are preventing teens from achieving permanency. For this reason, a significant part of this work is acknowledging these barriers and advocating for large-scale change.

BARRIER:

Current caseload sizes for county social workers are generally too high to allow for proactive efforts to achieve permanency. For youth under state guardianship, the county worker is essentially their legal parent. It is impossible for any parent to meet the expectations of that role in one interaction per month, which is the typical amount of contact for most youth when they are not experiencing an immediate crisis.

OVERCOMING THE BARRIER:

The financial condition of public child welfare agencies largely controls caseload size. It is possible within the current structure of any agency providing case management, independent living, and

permanency services for youth to find ways to streamline positions and responsibilities if the entire staff is clear on the purpose of child welfare intervention. Many agencies provide services to older youth within very narrow silos. For example, The Homecoming Project consistently found efforts to achieve permanency absent among workers and programs whose role was to provide independent living skills and supports. Conversely, adoption workers often had little to no understanding of the resources available to help youth develop life skills. As a result, youth in each track are provided incomplete information and services to which they are entitled.

Streamlining the professional roles within adolescent services would allow one worker to be responsible for assuring that youth are receiving both life skills and permanency services, with efforts focused on both simultaneously. It is clear from The Homecoming Project's experience that if there is not one professional whose responsibility it is to keep pushing the team to focus on permanency, it may not happen for older youth. A youth-development focused permanency effort includes many of the basic life skills that are currently taught in isolation in independent living skills classes. Integrating the two service delivery silos may lead to better outcomes in life skills development and higher rates of permanency.

BARRIER:

The decentralized nature of the child welfare system leaves a void in who has ultimate authority and under what circumstances individual workers or counties are held accountable for practices that fall short of both the letter and intent of state statute.

OVERCOMING THE BARRIER:

The Homecoming Project was designed to provide additional child-specific recruitment services to enhance the routine adoption work that county social workers are expected to perform during the first year after termination of parental rights. Unfortunately, a large percentage of youth referred to the program were not registered on the State Adoption Exchange, which is the minimum recruitment effort required by Minnesota statute. In many cases, virtually nothing had been done to secure permanency for youth prior to their referral to The Homecoming Project.

There is an urgent need for a transparent process for intervention or binding arbitration when team members on a youth's case are not in agreement on issues related to permanency. When professionals disagree on the particulars of a case, progress may be sabotaged either intentionally or through passive resistance to resolving concerns. Each time this occurs, youth lose.

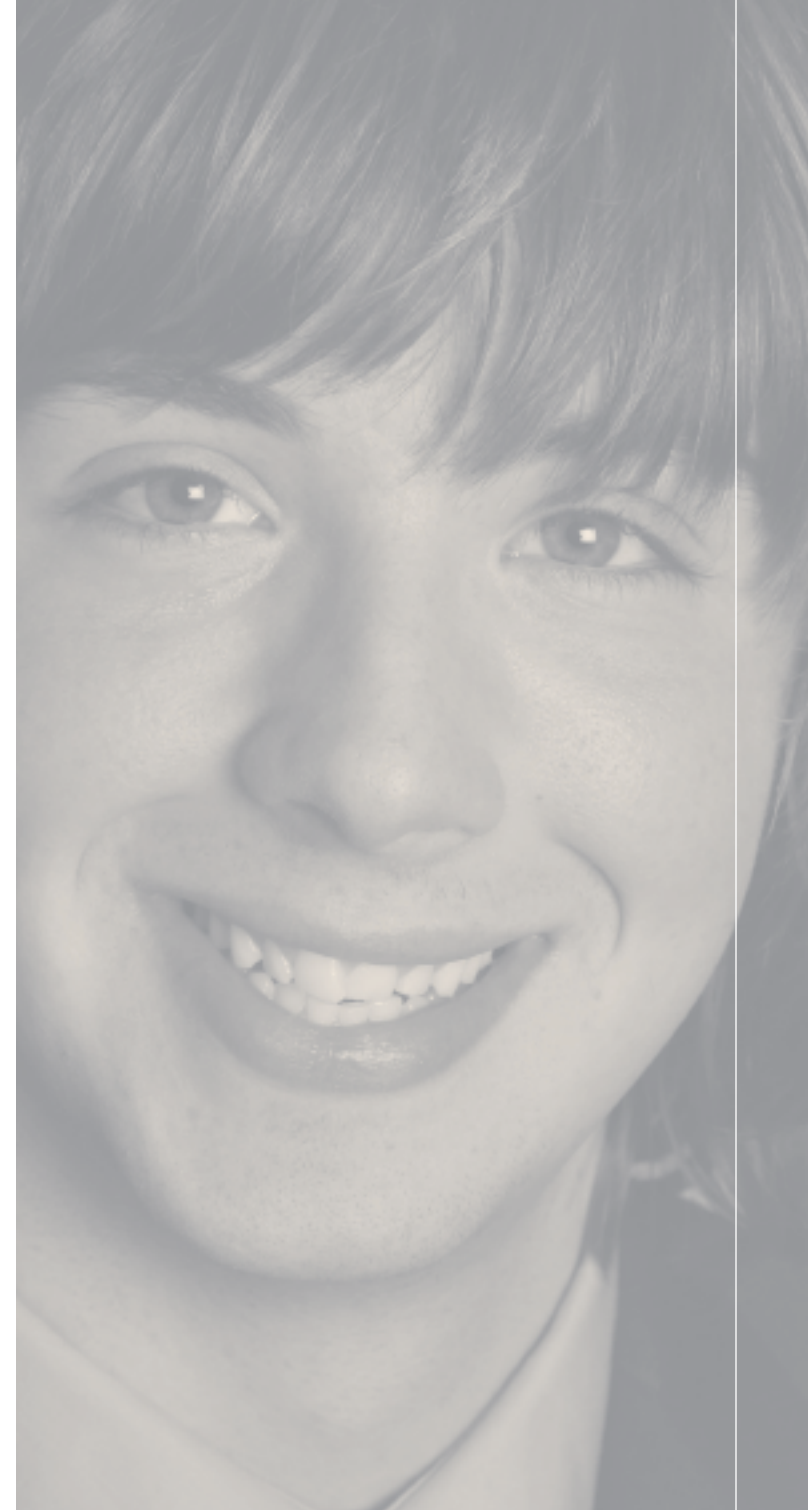
One solution proposed by The Homecoming Project is to institute a state-level Ombudsperson for child welfare. In addition, staff suggest that professionals in the field of youth permanency regularly gather to process and analyze work in cases that proceed smoothly as well as those that do not result in permanency. The intention is to foster a learning environment that would raise the overall standard of practice in youth permanency work.

BARRIER:

Workers or courts often equate Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) with a no contact order regarding birth family.

OVERCOMING THE BARRIER:

It is critical that all team members understand that a Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) does not necessarily require that all contact between youth and birth family be severed. Far too often, professionals, including social workers, guardians ad litem, attorneys, judges, parents, and therapists, make this assumption. Unless there is a no contact court order, the only thing a TPR does is terminate the birth parents' legal rights to make decisions about the care of their child. It does not erase any existing relationship or emotional attachment between the youth and the birth parent, and certainly does not sever relationships with



BETHANY'S STORY: IMPORTANCE OF ADEQUATELY PLANNING

Bethany, who lived in a residential treatment center, had been working with a Homecoming permanency specialist for about eight months when an adoptive family was identified. The family was excited to welcome Bethany into their home, but they were also concerned about some of her aggressive behaviors and their ability to support her during difficult times. Bethany's adoption workers were eager to move her from residential treatment into the family's home and proposed doing so about five months after the family was identified—only three months after Bethany and the family met. The quick pace of this transition was against the professional judgment of treatment center staff and the adoptive family's wishes, as they had not yet established appropriate services and supports for Bethany. Regardless, the move took place, and the transition did not go well. Bethany acted out in school and at home, and the family did not know where to go for support. Two weeks later, Bethany was removed from the home and placed in temporary shelter. She then went into a series of short-term placements. This was so disruptive from her routine that she forgot to take her medication for mental health issues. This experience was very difficult for Bethany and, unfortunately, she regressed considerably.

(Name and details changed to protect privacy.)

extended family and kin. Because family and kin are prospective adoptive resources as well as likely permanent connections for youth, it is best that the professionals keep an open mind about family contact.

BARRIER:

Currently there is a tendency to screen out potential families for teenagers as they often do not resemble traditional adoptive homes.

OVERCOMING THE BARRIER:

The Homecoming Project has seen some similar characteristics in the families who ultimately adopt teens. Successful families ask a lot of questions and challenge the system when they think a process or expectation does not make sense. These families confront professionals when the professionals do not do what they say they will do in a timely manner. Families expect workers to be available at odd hours and in non-traditional places. Assuming no confidential information is being discussed about the parent or a youth, meeting informally at a place like a coffee shop helps to de-emphasize the otherwise imposing power difference between

social workers and the families hoping to adopt. For many of the parents who have successfully adopted a Homecoming youth, the idea of adopting a teen stemmed from thoughts about social justice and the belief that it is simply wrong for teens to age out of care without committed families. They are the people who see the extensive problem and decide to do their part to contribute to the solution. They do not tend to be motivated by the desire to be called “Mom” or “Dad,” nor do most feel strongly about the youth taking their last name.

Recruitment, training, home studies, and matching activities should strive to assess the skills and interests of a family to determine which particular youth they might best be able to parent. The process should screen potential families into the pool more often than it screens them out. Families considering adopting from foster care have the right to proactive support and responsive professionals at all stages of the process. They will not and should not commit to adopt a youth if they feel they will be alone in times of distress.

“Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections.”

-Judith Lewis Herman, Trauma and Recovery

SUCCESS STORY

Allen experienced numerous challenges and hardships in his first 14 years. After his birth parents' rights were terminated, he went to live with relatives in another state. But Allen's fascination with guns, gangs, and drugs led him to make some dangerous decisions, and he was soon returned to Minnesota.

When Allen was referred to The Homecoming Project, he was living in his second residential treatment center. He was open to talking about adoption and seemed to have some insight into his troubled behavior. Allen provided a few names of families who had been supportive to him, and who The Homecoming Project could contact. One of the families was a former foster family, who were indeed anxious to hear about how Allen was and eager to make themselves available to provide respite care. The family reported that their pastor had earlier expressed interest in adopting Allen. Homecoming staff contacted the pastor and discovered that he and his wife had heard about Allen's return and were already in the process of updating their home study.

Allen had a lot of questions about living with a pastor. He was also concerned about his birth mom, who would be sad to hear that he was being adopted outside the birth family. Homecoming staff met with Allen's mom at the halfway house where she was living. She provided a lot of information about Allen's history and gave her blessing for him to move forward with adoption. That helped Allen tremendously in his decision-making.

After a few months of settling in with his new family, Allen reverted to dangerous behaviors and had encounters with the police. He was expelled from school for a semester and had to be home-schooled.

Through all of it, his parents remained committed. They advocated for him when he was in trouble to make sure that he was held accountable. They found resources for him in the community. They got him into a day treatment program for chemical abuse. They continued to remind Allen that they were his family.

Allen's parents also supported Allen's on-going relationships with his birth family. Allen had regular visits with his sister. Perhaps most impressive has been his parents' commitment to keep Allen connected with his birth mother, who has joined them for many holidays. When she is on her medication and sober she has been a great help in parenting Allen.

As The Homecoming Project comes to an end, Allen is doing great. Three years after moving in with his adoptive family he is working and has taken up fishing. He will be in school in the fall and is up to grade level in most subjects. He has a driver's license and uses the family car responsibly. He tells us that each day he becomes more and more convinced that he has choices about the future he wants for himself.

(Name and details changed to protect privacy.)

LIST OF RESOURCES ON OLDER YOUTH PERMANENCY

Wanted: Parents is an American Radioworks documentary about teen adoption, featuring a family from The Homecoming Project. <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/fostercare/index.html>

Listening to Parents helps children in foster care achieve permanent families by improving communication between the child welfare system and parents interested in adopting children. <http://www.listeningtoparents.org/index.htm>

The California Permanency for Youth Project is dedicated to assuring that no youth will leave the California child welfare system without a permanent lifelong connection to a caring adult. <http://www.cpy.org>

The National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning at Hunter College School of Social Work focuses on increasing the capacity and resources of child welfare agencies. <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/index.html>

The National Child Welfare Resource Center for Youth Development provides training and technical assistance to publicly administered and supported child welfare agencies. <http://www.nrcys.ou.edu/yd/default.html>

The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute provides leadership to inform adoption laws, policies, and practices to improve the lives of everyone impacted by adoption. <http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/index.php>

The Reclaiming Youth Network connects professionals, citizens, parents, and policy leaders concerned with children and youth in conflict in home, school, and community. <http://www.reclaiming.com/>

Casey Family Services aims to improve the lives of at-risk children and strengthen families and communities by providing high-quality, cost-effective services that advance positive practice and sound public policy. <http://www.caseyfamilyservices.org>

Kids Are Waiting: Fix Foster Care Now is a national campaign dedicated to ensuring that all children in foster care have safe, permanent families by reforming the federal financing structure that governs the foster care system. <http://kidsarewaiting.org/>

Parenting Education Resources is an information page for families with teenagers, sponsored by the University of Minnesota Extension Service. <http://www.parenting.umn.edu/programs/familiesWithTeens/index.htm>

The National Network for Foster Children and Foster Youth provides foster youth opportunities to become involved, informed, and independent in their transitioning journey towards adulthood. <http://www.fyi3.com/fyi3/index.cfm>

Foster Care Alumni of America is a national non-profit association whose mission is to connect the foster care alumni community and to transform foster care policy and practice, ensuring opportunity for people in and emancipated from foster care. <http://www.fostercarealumni.org/>

Permanency Pact is excellent for exploring concepts of permanency with a youth. It may easily be used as an assessment tool with a youth and foster parent. www.fosterclub.com/pdfs/permpact.pdf

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