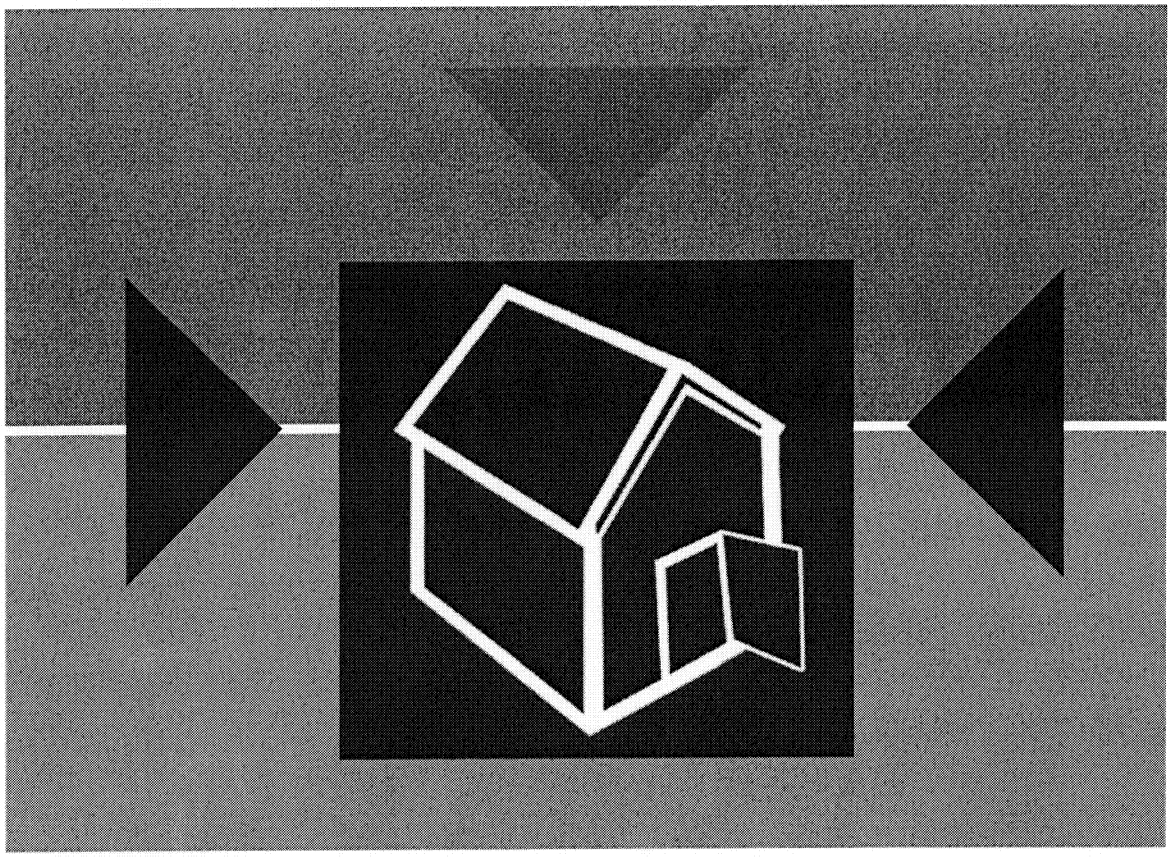
YOUTH PERSPECTIVES



ON PERMANENCY

Reina M. Sanchez
California Youth Connection

C.P.Y.P.

California Permanency for Youth Project

The California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP)
wishes to acknowledge the generous support of
the Stuart Foundation.

California Permanency for Youth Project
4200 Park Blvd., PMB 273
Oakland, CA 94602
Phone: 510 - 268-0038
Fax: 510 - 663 - 8441

http://www.cpyp.org/

California Youth Connection
604 Mission St. 9th floor
San Francisco, CA 94105
Phone: 415- 442-5060
Fax: 415- 442-0720

http://www.calyouthconn.org

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INTRODUCTION

"What do foster youth think?"

Every time the California Permanency for Youth Project has a bright idea, if we are lucky enough to have a former foster youth in earshot, we hear, "Did you ask youth? Did you ask a former foster youth? What do *they* think?" Our advisory board members, who had been in foster care, must be weary of telling us again and again, but after two years, we think we get the message – that the voice of youth is essential to effective youth permanency work. The more information we have from youth, the better off we are.

Interestingly, it is this issue, listening to youth, that has aroused the most anxiety when it arises in task forces and with line staff, administrators and group homes. The first reaction is "but." "But they don't know what they want, they're impulsive, they've been put into a group living situation for a reason, we can't listen to them." In contrast, what youth and former foster youth say is, "If someone had asked me what I needed, I could have told them both what I needed and who could have given it to me." The California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP) isn't suggesting that youth should have the only voice in this discussion, but we are saying that theirs is the one voice that has not been sought or heard. Listening to youth is, at the least, food for thought, and, more probably, food for self-examination among all of us who work on permanency for youth.

We knew some of what the four youth on our CPYP Task Force and Advisory Board thought but that wasn't necessarily representative. To be effective with the legislature, public and private child welfare administrators and line staff, we needed more information about what other current and former foster youth thought about the idea and reality of permanency.

We therefore enlisted the help of California Youth Connection (CYC), which provided Berisha Black to coordinate the fact finding process. Berisha worked with the interviewer and facilitator for the focus group, found youth to participate, and completed the logistics that made it possible for the interviews and focus groups to occur. John Ott interviewed the youth. (A description of the methodology used can be found on p. 22) CYC provided a second resource in Reina M. Sanchez, who fashioned the raw material of the interviews and focus groups into a document that speaks clearly and movingly of youth's ideas, concerns, and hopes about permanency. In fact, line staff could use this information to inform their discussions with youth about permanence. To Berisha Black, Reina M. Sanchez, John Ott, and Janet Knipe, director of CYC, CPYP is immensely grateful.

Our gratitude to the youth who participated in the process is unbounded. Without them, we would know little of the barriers, fears and hopes that keep youth from finding permanency. It is their quotes that make this document.

Thank you.

Mardith J. Louisell, MSW, MA
Consultant, California Permanency for Youth Project

Theme One:
Foster Youth Culture—How it relates to ideas about permanency

A. Displacement

The one experience that defines foster youth culture more so than any other is the experience of being displaced from one's family of origin. Whether this experience occurred before a youth was old enough to consciously remember it or in a youth's early child or teenhood, by definition all foster youth know what it is like to reside in alternative living situations.

The experience of displacement has severe implications for the rest of a youth's life. These implications include tendencies to distrust care providers and child welfare professionals, a conscious avoidance of forming personal relationships while in foster care, and the deep seated feeling that no one loves or cares.

> "Really, you make no friends in foster care and, even when you do, very rarely do you ever talk to them again because somebody ends up getting moved."

> "The more I moved around, the more I felt like I could just walk away from something if there was a problem. I felt there really wasn't anybody there for me, so what was the point in getting attached to anybody, because I was going to be moving pretty soon."

> "When we got her, my foster sister was six years old and she had been in six foster homes. With her, permanency was a big thing, because she had extreme behavioral problems and she figured that, if she didn't like something, she could get out of it by misbehaving."

> "The foster care system never went through the steps to allow me to go back to that school because the social worker didn't feel the school was a good place for me because I was African-American and the school was 98% Caucasian and I needed to be placed with Black people in a Black neighborhood and go to a Black school. So he put me in a Black high school and put me in a Black group home and thought that he was doing his Black Power movement contribution."

> "I've heard some foster kid horror stories and I feel for those people. I feel like I'm an exception to the norm in the foster care system – from the time I was young being placed in only one family and leading a stable life."

> "The system got in the way of developing myself and my trust with other people, because I kept on moving so much. I really didn't feel like I could be stable in one place. I felt like if I had a problem, I could just move away – because that's what always happened, whether I wanted to or not."

> "A gift most, if not all, foster youth have is the gift of discerning who a person really is, screening the person and being right about your screening. That is probably the best gift foster children have and that's quite useful throughout your entire life."

B. Loneliness and Stigmatization

The original experience of displacement causes foster youth to feel that they are ultimately and truly alone in the world. These feelings are exacerbated by prevailing social constructs that define "real" families as mother/father units of blood relation—and foster youth do not fit into that model. Society's ignorance about foster youth further punishes foster youth by stigmatizing them as delinquent, abnormal, and unkempt. This stigmatization leads foster youth to feel embarrassed and ashamed of themselves and their situation.

> "We really feel alone. When you're in the system, you're taken away from your parents and there's this stigmatization against foster kids. It's 'what did you do wrong?' Not 'what did your family do

wrong?' So you take the responsibility on yourself and think, 'Well, what's wrong with me?' And you need someone to tell you there's nothing wrong with you."

"For me, growing up, I tried to avoid the fact that I was a foster child. I didn't like to be reminded of it, so I hated having to deal with social workers. I just wanted to lead my life as normal as possible and social workers respected that. They visited when they had to and left and didn't disturb me."

"In high school, I didn't share my status as a foster youth with anyone. That was a secret kept in my family, so I didn't interact with other foster kids and didn't know what it was like for them."

"People treat foster kids really badly. That's why I think youth don't want people to know that they are foster youth – they are ashamed and embarrassed."

"I had a horrible attitude towards the foster care system and a horrible attitude towards other foster kids. I thought, 'I don't want to run around with a lot of raggedy foster kids.'"

"The ILP program didn't benefit me so much because my parents were really great parents and instilled the importance of education and how to live a good life, but just to meet other people in similar situations and to have that hidden thing in my life be known amongst others – I appreciated that."

Foster youth are acutely aware of the family dynamics where they live.

"It was always known that there was a difference between me and her own children. I grew knowing that those are her kids and I'm a foster kid."

"Even though my foster mother treated us foster children and her biological children equally, the biological children were often jealous of us. When we came to that home, she really embraced us. Her son couldn't understand that. He would say to her in front of us, 'I'm your real son. Why are you treating them like this?' And she said to him, 'They are my children. I don't care what you say.'"

"It's not the same as being a biological child in your own home. That I've experienced from being at my grandmother's, then back into care, then back to my grandmother's."

"Social workers and foster parents operate under the sense that they are taking care of us, just like a regular family. I am aware that *it is not a* regular family."

C. Loyalty to Biological Family

"When I got older, there were many instances when our actual, biological family—aunts and uncles, cousins, grandma and grandpa—tried to contact us just to meet us and tell us about what went on, but our adoptive mother said no every single time. I thought that was wrong for her to decide. It's not like we were leaving her or anything. When she did that, it hurt and it brought a lot of anger towards her because she didn't give us the options of saying if we wanted to go meet our biological family or not."

"I would have liked someone to help me to build a stronger relationship with my brother, encouraging more passes and time with him and involving him more, maybe, with my situation."

"I was adopted by a woman when I was young. To her face or to her immediate family, I will say "Mom" out of respect because she took care of my sister and me for thirteen years. Outside to my brothers and sisters or anybody else, I call her by her first name because when I say "Mom," people who know about my other situation say are you talking about your biological or your adopted mom? So I just call her by her first name so they know who I'm talking about."

"I would drop my life at the drop of a dime if my mother needed me to do anything. I've canceled therapy appointments, I've left work early to drive three hours just to take her to the grocery store and she would never ever cancel a lunch date if I needed to go to the emergency room. As much as I know that any conversation I ever had with her never yielded me anything good, it's so hard not to think about her or call her and talk to her."

"The would put the two little ones together, put me separate and my other brother separate. I just couldn't. I was like, 'No, no, no, I'm not going to leave this office until I know that all of us are going to be together.'"

"I've never been separated from my siblings and I'm thankful for that, even if they get on my nerves. Sisters and brothers belong together, even if they don't like each other."

D. Lack of Social Capital

Foster youth cannot achieve permanency if they do not have people in their lives with whom to have a permanent connection. When a foster youth's daily circle of people are mostly child welfare professionals, attorneys, care providers or other people associated with the foster care system, the chance is greater that when they emancipate they will have to leave these relationships behind. If they leave foster care without having created meaningful relationships with people outside the foster care system, their chances for finding permanence are greatly diminished.

"At the very least, give me guerrilla training. Give me an orientation to the foster care system. Give me skills on how to express my needs and get my needs met, some orientation and skills specifically to permanency. How can I take control in developing relationships? Help us understand what adults need from us. How can we (youth) play a role in developing permanency?"

"Encourage the youth, while they are still in foster care, to make relationships outside of the foster care system and with people their own age, maybe even a couple of years older."

"One of the biggest supports that has been necessary for me is role models and examples of healthy relationships, because coming out of foster care I didn't know how to have relationships with people. I always found a way to burn those bridges. Now I have people who are huge on being role models on how to communicate my feelings."

"It's stupid to think that transitional housing should be a place where you just work and gather money and then buy your own place, because most of the people I know are not that responsible and once they've left transitional housing, they're homeless again. Most of them wanted to go to school and that's where they would have made a connection to want to do better and have a better life, but the transitional housing I was in was, like, no, you have to work and you can't go to school."

"A lot of people come out of the foster care system socially inept and maladjusted because of group homes and foster homes. The foster care system needs to promote more social 'butterfliedness.' I wanted to bring friends home to the group home but you can't. You have to get permission from your social worker and deal with finger prints. In foster homes you get a little leniency, but with group homes you are screwed."

"Give a child an opportunity to be expressive and not bash them for it. Instead of saying, no, you have to do it this way, just say, it's better for you to do it this way, but go ahead and try it your way. Maybe it will work or maybe it won't, but let them experience it."

"Is the social service system going to follow me everywhere I go until I'm ninety-five years old? If you want to make an impression on my life, teach me how to be social. Teach me how I should be as an individual. Ask me what I would like to be. A successful person in life? Easygoing? Flamboyant and crazy? Help me be that."

"I think if I had a role model in my life or just a man figure to give me the knowledge he had as a young man, that would have really meant a lot, made me a better person."

E. Role of Social Workers

Youth look to social workers for help, sometimes as their only port in, not just a storm, but a hurricane.

"Out of the blue they rip you out of your house and stick you in, you know, stranger's homes and stuff. It's really devastating when it first happens and since they're the first person that you're talking to when it's happening, they should make you feel like, 'Look, I'm here for you. I'm not going to leave you alone.'"

"Social workers should make you feel like you can count on them – mine were kind of cold. They didn't feel very warmly towards me, and it was like, 'Okay, they're my social worker – am I not supposed to feel like I can count on them?'"

"I saw the first social worker when they pulled us out. Then they gave me another social worker and I would see her once a month, but only fifteen minutes, twenty minutes, and that's it."

"The majority of my social workers paid enough attention to me to see where I was going and which way they should guide me, not only as far as placement, but in whatever situation I was in at the time."

"I see my social worker every month. Some people I know in foster care can't even get in touch with their social workers. When I call my social worker, I can at least get in touch with them. So I think they've been doing a good job."

"Just recently I got a new social worker, so it's taken some time to get to know her. But my old social worker always took me aside, asked me how I was doing, am I getting enough to eat, what's going on in my life; anything good, anything bad?"

"My social worker – she's okay. We talk, but not about support and stuff. It's like, 'Oh, how are you doing? How's school? How're your grades? Do you need anything?' That's about it."

Theme Two:
What permanence means to youth

Although foster youth believe that permanency is important and that child welfare professionals should be promoting permanency, not all foster youth share the same understanding of what *permanency* is.

To help youth think through the different levels of permanency, and what each level means to them, permanency was broken down into three categories: 1) relational or emotional, 2) physical, and 3) legal.

A. Foster youth want permanence.

Despite the fact that society often portrays foster youth as neither being worthy of nor wanting love and affection, foster youth want to feel connected to people whose support is genuine and unconditional.

> "It is not clear whether or not anyone can help you get the feeling of permanence—the sense of peace where you know someone cares about you and loves you unconditionally and will stand by you if you become a crackhead or impregnate somebody. But the system can increase the probability that you will have that feeling."

> "There's something inside because of what has happened in your life that wants the love and care that you were denied or are in need of. For me it was having the relationship with a mother figure, a father figure, and siblings. That above all was important.

> "He was a fake person who would cuss and threaten to whoop us. But I dealt with it because I felt it was a family. I'd rather have a family like that, than not have somebody at all."

> "The government takes the responsibility for taking people away from the parents—thereby becoming a youth's "mommy" and "daddy." But "mommy" and "daddy" help you out until you die. If the government thinks it's meeting its responsibility to us with the programs that are offered now, then the foster care system is a bad parent."

> "I don't know what I would do if I had to move around every two months or every six months like I hear people doing. I think what made me the person I am today is that I have so much stability in my life. That's what really helped me get over the fact that I wasn't with my real mother, being with someone who was there for me and always treated me like her real child."

> "Permanency would make all the difference in the experience of a youth's life in the system because it's stability. It provides a youth with the opportunity to really know what it's like to be cared for, not just because you're a foster child, but because you're a person."

B. Relational Permanency

When asked to choose between relational, physical or legal permanence, foster youth largely agree that relational permanence is the most important type of permanence that one can achieve. Youth trust in their ability to sense when a relationship offers a true emotional connection, and for many youth the sense of emotional stability is far more important than legal recognition of a relationship.

> "The priority should be emotionally stable placements. A place where a youth actually feels comfortable, they feel secure, they feel like they're loved, they feel like they can love. Then think about adoption."

> "Legal permanence could be taken off the list and I wouldn't miss it. You can have legal permanency —but without relational or physical permanency, what's the point? By law you have to stay here. Without the last two, the first is not important. They all really feed each other."

"Relational is really the most important. But the reality is that in this country everything is based on documentation. The day my grandparents got legal guardianship of me, my grandparents were, like, now you are ours, now we are going to take care of you. And my brother asked, can we call you mom and dad now? And I was pissed off, I was like, hell, no I don't want to call you mom and dad. But it just goes to show, documentation means a lot."

"It's really important to make sure before emancipating a youth that they have one person. If I have somebody that I know I can depend on, that loves me and cares that I wake up tomorrow and am still breathing, I can get through it. I can walk through it."

"I went through foster care dreaming and wishing for a mother figure. What is most important is for someone to make a commitment to you, someone who you could trust and feel comfortable with."

"They asked me if I had any family members where I can go and I don't really get along with my family, so I was like, 'You know what? I don't have any aunts or uncles or anyone where I can stay.' I asked them if I could stay with Becky because Becky was like, 'I'll take her. I'll take them all,' but they wouldn't let me go with her because she didn't have her license for foster youth."

"Relational permanency is the most important and legal is just closure for the first two (relational and physical), something that says you are mine legally and there is nothing that can take us apart."

"Emotional permanence is above all very important because in the foster care system you know someone's going to provide food and you know that you're going to be in a home – you just don't know which one. If you can count on someone to come back to, and you know that and they know that, you don't need that legal permanency because it's distrust right there if you need to make things legal."

"For older youth, emotional permanency is so much more important."

"It's important to know that there is someone I can count on who wouldn't turn their back on me."

"If it's true emotional commitment from a set of foster parents, then I would believe it...if it's a real thing, that's enough. But the fact is there is something to be said about legal permanence in that you know that you can't get a 7-day notice."

"I would put more weight on the feeling of a home than I would on whether they adopted me or not. Because even legal adoptions are fucked up, you know that."

C. Physical Permanency

Youth understand physical permanency as directly correlated to the number of opportunities a person has for self-development and future life success: if youth are provided a safe, stable living environment, they will have more time to focus on education, volunteerism, planning for emancipation, and other activities.

"What I hear a lot is that people who don't have permanency in their life get behind on school and they miss out on a lot of great things. I never had to switch schools constantly or move constantly or live out of a box. Therefore I think physical permanency would be a good idea."

"I can truly say that the goal of every foster child is to live in one home with people they can call family and not have to experience a lot of emotional turmoil."

"When I moved to a new placement, she made us feel really comfortable and I even had my own room. The first night we got there, we all had fun and we went out to eat. It was really cool, I got to have my own room. She really made us feel welcome. I wasn't sad anymore."

D. Legal Permanency

No single issue among foster youth is more passionately debated than whether or not legal permanency should be a priority in foster care.

Legal Permanence is Important

Foster youth understand legal permanence as meaning one of two things: guardianship or adoption. Those youth who value legal permanence believe in the importance of state recognition of emotionally established relationships. For them, it is not enough to live with a family and call that family by arbitrary, non-legal labels. They want legal recognition—and responsibilities—to shape the relationship.

> "Even though I cannot be adopted right now because my biological parents still maintain their rights, after I turn eighteen, I want to be adopted because it's like a closure to the family. It's making it so that the last piece has been put in the puzzle. Right now, we know it mentally. But legally, it would be putting the family together. Right now she's considered a legal guardian. If she adopts me, it would be mother."

> "My foster parents had expressed that they wanted to adopt me and, of course, as a child, I really wanted to be adopted and have it finalized, have their last name and be done with my birth mom. My foster parents became my legal guardian after many years, but I was never put up for adoption – my birth mom never allowed that."

> One youth, adopted at an early age and asked whether she would feel different about her family if they had not adopted her, said, "I would still feel that there's a door that hasn't quite been opened for me. Like I'm not fully wanted. Especially since I already had the trauma of being removed from my biological family. If my adoptive family hadn't adopted me that would really hurt me."

> "I was the only one that was adopted of several foster siblings. They've told me that because they still have ties to their family, it is better for them not to be adopted. But in another way they want that bond of totally being a part of the family that is raising them."

> "I felt that I would have wanted a family that was legally responsible, somebody who was willing to adopt me, give me the opportunities that I never had. To be as equal as a normal child."

> "Legal permanency would have been the best thing for my interests, because that is a legal commitment that you could not sit on the side, and as far as foster parents, I don't really like that situation, because kids mess up, we're not perfect. And if we mess up, foster parents can say, hey, I don't want you. And get that last check. And that's not right, that's no actual commitment."

> "I think that legal permanency is just as important as any one of them. Just because someone loves you, if there is not a legal action that says that the youth cannot move around, it does not work. Adoption lessens liability and makes it easier for youth to live a regular life—go to the movies by yourself, check the mail without supervision. Legal permanency institutionalizes the notion that you are not going to move around. On the other hand, there are resource implications of becoming adopted—these can be addressed through bureaucracy and policy changes."

Legal Permanence is Not Important

Youth who advocated against prioritizing the legal aspect of relationships did so for two main reasons. First, because of the experience of being placed and displaced over and over again, many foster youth do not trust the legal system to establish personal relationships. These youth are hesitant to put themselves in the position where their personal relationship are defined by institutions of power. They feel that personal relationships should be established more naturally, and that once emotional permanence exists, legal permanence is unnecessary. Secondly, youth understand that there are resource implications to adoptive relationships—once someone is adopted, they no longer qualify for the extensive financial aid and ILP services that most foster youth benefit from.

"She said she would adopt me, but it wasn't a big issue for me. Because it didn't matter. That would just be a title. She wouldn't even have to be my legal guardian and I'd still love her just as much."

I live with my grandparents under guardianship. They did not adopt me because they did not want to offend my mom by doing that. They still care about her feelings even through the things she has done. It wouldn't have made a difference anyway if they had adopted me. I wouldn't have felt any different about the relationship."

"The one (kind of permanence) that I have a big problem with is legal. Legally on a document, I'm your cattle, I'm a cabbage patch doll —do you really have to have possession over me in order to love me, because I am *your* kid now, not just *a* kid now? All the benefits that go to an individual because they are foster kids are important. It's not right for a fourteen year old who got adopted not to get the resources that other foster youth get."

"Do not trust what the legal moves mean in terms of relational connection."

"Legal permanency is a chance for choice. It is a chance for someone to choose you and for you to choose them. Does it matter that that moment of choice is recognized by the system? From my vantage point it doesn't."

"When youth get adopted, the funds get cut off, and I really want to go to college and I don't think my mother could afford to pay for me to go to college. Being in the system, going to college would be easy for me because I would get a lot more opportunities."

"Depending on your age, you really aren't too much in tune with legal permanency. I think, above all, it's the emotional, having someone there."

"Even though my foster mom never adopted me, I thought of her as my real mom because that's the way she treated me. I don't think adoption would have made a difference."

"Sometimes legal permanency does not work. People have already adopted the kid and then end up maybe kicking the kid out of the house or putting them on the streets."

"I knew that I was going to be in my adoptive placement until I turned eighteen, and then as soon as I was eighteen I was gone. I could not legally be on my own before then, but I had no emotional connection to that family so I was leaving."

E. Permanency Outcomes

Permanent Connections

The majority of the youth interviewed found at least one permanent connection with a responsible adult, naming as examples foster parents, next door neighbors, extended family of foster parents, former foster parents, peer mentors, Independent Living Program Coordinators, high school counselors, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), sisters and brothers, grandparents, a group home manager, group home staff, best friends, professors and social workers.

"My foster parents (are my connection). I even asked them, what's going to happen to me when I'm eighteen? They're like, you can stay with us for as long as you want and we'll always be here for you."

"My permanent connection was a younger couple. When I got there, the wife and the husband were about twenty-nine and it was a brother-sister kind of thing and still is to this day. They are my brother and my sister surrogates. They were totally supportive in everything that I did, from leadership in school to running clubs. They supported me when I wanted to be a surgeon and paid for my stethoscopes and my coats – up to the point when I decided, no, that's not for me, I want to go into business. Then they bought my first briefcase and went the whole nine yards. They were always there."

"My grandparents - but I consider them my parents."

"My last set of foster parents and my last social worker. I'm still in touch with them, it's just that I think it'd be unfair to me to call it a permanent relationship. Even though I still stay in touch with them, it's not like what I would have wanted."

"I know that she's always going to be there and I know that if I ever got in trouble that I would be able to come back home. So I feel like it's a new family, a new start."

"What my foster mother made clear to me and my brother was that 'You're not my foster children; you are my children.' She treated us exactly the same way she treated her biological children. When I was first placed with her, she was like, 'You can call me what you want to call me, but I prefer if you call me mama.'"

"My family (my Nina) because "she grew up with my mom, so she just knew the family and everything, but she was not considered because she was not an immediate part of the family. She was related by marriage."

Conditional Permanence

Some youth felt that they had permanent connections with adults on a conditional basis:

"Yes, I have a permanent connection - simply because I've been blessed to find at least one adult at any given phase since being in foster care that's totally taken me under their wing and that I've totally gotten attached to and they've been there for me. And, no, I don't, because it's always been a staff, a therapist, an attorney, all the people that I can't get attached to because of professional boundaries, who will say. 'Oh, you're not my client anymore, we can't talk anymore.'"

"That's a sometimes feeling," said a young woman adopted at an early age. "When there's no problems, when school's going well, social relationships are going well, yes, I can feel that connection. I can't wait 'till I come back from my first semester in college for winter break and have somebody there. I think, 'Oh, if I'm in college and this happens, I'm going to call home and tell my mom.' I have that feeling but when problems arise, that feeling disappears and I'm like, okay, when I leave, I guess I'm basically on my own. Some of this may have to do with my own capacity to trust, because I know my mom really loves me and she makes me understand how much it hurts, but I'm not so willing to just jump into trusting someone 100%."

No Permanent Connection

Other youth did not identify a permanent connection with an adult on whom they can depend:

"I was placed in long-term foster care when I was really young, and although the family treated me well and accepted me as a member of the family, I have a rocky relationship with them."

"I was placed with my aunt who provided physical permanency but no relationship permanency. We don't communicate and don't get into personal things. When I emancipate I will check up on her, see how she's doing every once in a while, but I wouldn't call her on a regular basis."

"I was placed with my grandparents, who provided me with physical permanency, but not emotional permanency. I felt that they took me in out of obligation, because they felt that was the right thing to do. I now have permanent people in my life, but only because I found them in college."

"What I gained through the system was a tight-knit group of friends, through CYC and interaction with other foster youth. I wouldn't consider them family, but I think they had my best interests at heart and I felt that and I appreciated it."

"After I left foster care, the only place I could go was my mom's house, where her husband had sexually abused me months before. My mom couldn't understand why I didn't want to be there. 'Look, it's your life,' I told her. 'If he's the type of person that's going to make you happy, fine, but he doesn't have to be part of my life. He doesn't need to talk to me. As long as he stays out of my way, I'll stay out of his.'"

"When I'm eighteen and leaving the system, am I going to get a replacement parent or a network of people? You need people who appreciate your circumstances instead of treating you like you are on welfare, where they put you through just to get a book voucher. When I was seventeen or eighteen, I lost hope that I was ever going to get a mother to care about me – but I would appreciate a network of people."

"I never realized that transitioning would be ten times harder than foster care ever could, because you're on your own then."

Sometimes a youth made suggestions about how the system could provide security after emancipation:

"You could have a transition parent. They would only have to support a youth's place to live during breaks. It would cost less money. Maybe put in five to ten hours per month, someone who would help youth between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four."

Theme Three:
Barriers to Permanency

Foster youth identified three major barriers to permanency: inappropriate placements, poorly selected and trained foster parents, and social workers' push toward adoption for foster children.

A. Inappropriate Placements:

To give foster youth the best chance to achieve permanency, foster youth must have the opportunity to live in a safe, caring environment that is suited to their needs. Foster youth define the key elements of a "safe" and "caring" environment as: a neighborhood free from drugs and crime, foster homes free from abuse and neglect, and foster parents who are committed mentally and emotionally to supporting youth. Foster youth believe that the child welfare system does not currently strive to meet this criteria of a "safe" and "caring" environment when placing youth, and any success in achieving positive placements should be attributed to "luck of the draw" rather than something that the foster care system actually tried to achieve.

> "Social workers should spend more time looking into the neighborhood, the status of the neighbors, the role the neighbors play in the group home environment and other factors, before placing youth because two of the group homes that I was in were right across the street from gang bangers. They used to come up to our rooms and sell us narcotics."
>
> "Try to see if you could match up personality types, match a kid with a person who can work with them."
>
> "I honestly just believe that it's the luck of the draw."
>
> "The placements that I was in were perfect. I was gifted. The placements flowed with whatever situation or emotional state I was in at the time. Whereas I know of other youth who were just placed and misplaced and displaced all over the place, just because they could be. Or because now that money can't be made off them in this placement, the system or the foster parents are going to try and switch the kid to another place."

B. Poorly selected and improperly trained foster parents.

Recruitment and Screening:

Foster youth are generally unsatisfied with quality of the foster parent population. Foster youth feel that more intensive screening and better training must take place in order to have foster parents who truly meet the needs of youth. Foster youth generally feel that foster parents are "in it for the money" and that foster parents have no vested interest in promoting permanency for foster youth.

> "Recruit more dedicated foster parents, people who understand, people who care more."
>
> "Make a massive recruiting campaign...recruit the right kind of people, sturdy people with heart."
>
> "When you first move in a home, foster parents seem all nice in front of the social worker, but inside, they're terrible. I think the social worker should stay there for the kid for a while...and monitor and see how things go."
>
> "Make foster parents go through psychological tests."
>
> "Figure out some kind of test...I think there are three qualities that we need in a great foster parent: parental intelligence, knowing how not to take things personally and self-sufficiency."

"Recruit among the middle class and educated sectors of our society in order to deter the economic value of taking in foster children."

"I think a lot of foster parents are in it just for the money. I know it's hard, but it should be people who actually care more."

"It takes a more in-depth study of the parent, not just an evaluation of their home and of their background. What is your emotional state right now, and what has it been before? It should be more of what do you really have to offer a youth versus how much money can you get for taking one in. Granted, the majority of the families are in it for the money."

Training and Support:

Once suitable foster parents are selected, foster youth want those parents to undergo extensive training on foster youth culture, parenting skills, and adolescent development. Some of this training should be conducted by current and former foster youth.

"Don't just get trained by someone who's been certified as a social worker. Let a youth who's been through it tell you what it's really like."

"Knowing how to respond appropriately is one aspect of relational permanency. Just making the kid feel like they can tell the foster parent anything, and even if it's something they'll get in trouble for, not overreacting. Because I notice staff or foster parents overreact and made me feel, 'Well, I'm not going to tell you anything now.'"

"Do not issue ultimatums (to the youth). The system put me in a home that would issue an ultimatum. 'It's either Cadet Corps program or us!' And any time I was issued an ultimatum, I automatically chose the leaving option."

"Foster parents need better training on how to work with adolescent foster youth. Being in the system, it's hard to trust everybody because we're always on the move. When they get us, they see that we don't really trust them—it's not our fault. We're scared; we're tired of being moved left to right."

"I know there's training for foster parents. Maybe youth like me can participate in some of the training."

"We need to train foster parents to think differently, so even if a child leaves your home, it doesn't mean you don't have to be connected to that child. Maybe we need to reinforce it in the courts and say foster parents have a right to stay in touch with kids that lived in their home. That way maybe foster parents will be able to feel more invested in the foster children that live with them."

"The only way that I knew as a foster child that people cared about me was when people went out of their way for me. Maybe the foster care system could find funds to help foster parents do this, go to the movies, Disneyland. In the beginning of the relationship, there needs to be a lot of attention into building that in and continuing to do things like that for the foster child in order to sustain it."

"Don't constrain us. Honestly, I felt like animals, you can't do this, can't do that, can't do anything. That makes us feel really enclosed and like we're not really living our teenhood."

Support for Foster Parents

Despite the fact that foster youth are sometimes hypercritical of foster parenting and foster parents, youth are aware of the strenuous challenges and responsibilities that a good foster parent faces. This is why foster youth recommend that foster parents receive the appropriate level of support. Youth feel that if foster parents are happy and satisfied with their role and the support that comes along with that role, they will be better equipped to take care of foster youth.

> "Create a prestige program around being a foster parent. Just like we give senior citizens and veterans benefits, foster parents should receive benefits. We can figure out ways to make this a very prestigious thing, if we put the right resources into it, if we believe in it."

> "Pay foster parents a ton more."

C. Youth Hesitations about Adoption

Although some youth testified that adoption provided them with all aspects of permanency, others questioned adoption as the primary strategy by which child welfare professionals try to ensure permanency for foster youth.

> "Adoption is pretty much every social worker's dream, to have the children on their caseload in adoptive homes. Okay, that's fine, but what about me when I was seventeen? Was that really going to best serve my needs at that time?"

> "I think they say, okay, get adopted, that's less money we have to spend on you. It's capitalistic America, we no longer have to give you foster care payments or transitional housing."

> "I was four years old and the social worker took me to the church and after that I was adopted. I think it would have worked out just a little better if I had at least gotten to know the family and mom before I came to live with them. Because one day my foster mother was, like, okay, pack up."

> "When I was adopted, I was four and a half, going on five, not even in school yet so I didn't know how to write. They told me to write my name on this line. I didn't know what was going on and there were all these new people and they're, like, okay, you're going to go home with this lady today."

> "I remember the social worker coming one day and he was talking about me being in a new home, being adopted. I didn't really understand that whole concept, because I felt that where I had been was my home."

Theme Four:
How to Empower Foster Youth to Achieve Permanency

Provide Access to Information:

The most important way that child welfare professionals can empower foster youth to be involved in achieving permanency is by talking to them about different permanency options early on.

> "Just as people are going to find out about sex, they are going to ask questions about permanency. Just talk to them."

> "Talk to foster kids when they are ready. It should be an individualized response, and it should be the system's job to assess when this individual is ready. Create multiple ways to understand where youth are coming from."

> "Children need a basic understanding of the terms, adoption and guardianship, and of where these steps are leading and how it can benefit them in the long run."

> "Foster kids start questioning at a really young age. People should be affirmed that they are not a bad kid, that they did not do anything wrong."

> "I work with kids from 4th to 8th grade and a lot of kids that I knew, kids that have parents, take for granted the whole meaning of relationship permanency because they have never been without it. Foster children have an understanding of what relationships mean more than other children because they have never had it. But (the understanding) does depend on their age and it should be talked about as early as possible."

> "You know that your circumstances are different from other folks. So this conversation should happen at a young age."

> "Everybody works a different way. I didn't care for permanency until I left the system and I didn't start looking for it until a couple years ago. That's why there should be many opportunities to engage in this interaction."

Listen to Youth:

Foster youth continue to express the importance of asking youth what they want and listening to youth's needs.

> "One thing that is widely overlooked is the voice and the feelings of the child. I really believe that the child has an opinion from a very early age. I think children know what's right and what feels good and what feels bad and if they're happy or not happy. I think that's often overlooked. I see that as very sad."

> "The age should not matter. Once they are old enough, five, six, seven and able to communicate and comprehend, we should talk to them about what they want – you should be able to get what you want. Everyone should go to their court hearings and one of the questions that should be on the emancipation check list is, 'Do you have somebody?' You shouldn't be able to leave the court unless you do. You can't leave it up to the social workers because everything with social workers falls through the cracks. Papers don't even get seen."

> "Let the child have a say in where they want to be. And let them know beforehand that just because they are being placed somewhere else doesn't guarantee that the second placement is going to be any better than the first. Give youth the opportunity to weigh that risk."

"The role of the foster care system is to always try to put the child back with their natural parents – but sometimes I think the thing that's most important is what the child feels."

"Give older children the ultimate decision as to where they're going and who they're going to live with. Let them make decisions with their own mind, not just social workers and judges and case workers and CASAs making all the decisions. Of course, if it's a negative place, then the social worker can change it and let the child know why."

"People need to know what is going on in foster kids' thinking about our relationships. It might be helpful to have a monthly or quarterly journal that I know is going to be read by multiple parties. A conversation with the social worker won't always get all the players – a journal will."

"Most of the time the social worker does not want the youth to be independent and help themselves. The social worker feels like they are the one who should be in control and not the child."

"Permanency would be beautiful in an ideal world. I would challenge you and your organization to do this. When you have more meetings to make a decision on this area, involve a foster child in the system and one that is emancipated. Don't just hear representation from one side – because you get the ones that are more pissed off like me."

Foster youth believe that social workers should be in charge of having conversations about permanency with youth early and often. Foster youth also strongly feel that these conversations should take place more or less naturally and should not be led in such a way that the youth feels coerced into making decisions with which they do not fully agree.

"The discussion should be reoccurring because things change, and you might not understand it the first time."

"Things that are natural, and don't need explanation in non-foster care homes get technical in the foster care system. The discussion should be something that happens naturally. Social workers should be a part of it, but I don't think that it should be brought up all the time."

"Youth should not be steered toward what social workers perceive as the "right" answer. In a lot of instances, some children are brainwashed."

"Bring up the question in a normal conversation. Just by asking questions you find out what the child is like, who they like, etc. Have more than one person talk to the child because sometimes youth don't like their social worker. Everyone should work together for the benefit of the child."

"Social workers should make sure that youth are not being influenced by others. They should ask the youth why they made the decision they did."

"The social worker should have the conversation, but we shouldn't just put the permanent connection on the social worker. Ask the youth who is important in their life? Have them make a list."

"People say that everyone should be involved, but when I was in foster care, I milked my case. I did everything, I wrote my attorney. If the child doesn't take action, who will?"

"How do you know that the child is thinking long term about what decisions he or she is making? Some decisions are made on impulse, about what the child wants right now."

Methodology of Current and Former Foster Youth Interviews

John Ott, Consultant

The data for this report emerged from a series of phone interviews conducted during October and November 2003 and a focus group held in December 2003 that included some of the young people who had been interviewed. Focus group outreach and planning were conducted by Berisha Black, California Youth Connection. The primary audience for "Youth Perspectives on Permanency" is professionals working in child welfare.

Twenty-five young people participated in the phone interviews. All of them had extensive personal experience with the child welfare system in California.

The group included: 17 women and 8 men; Young people with an average age of 19.4 years, and an age range from 16 to 24; Latino, African-American, Asian, and White youth, and youth of mixed racial backgrounds; Young people who had experienced various kinds of placements, including group homes, foster homes, relative care, legal guardianship, permanent adoption, transitional housing, as well as other settings; Emancipated youth and youth still in the child welfare system; Young people who had experienced multiple placements and young people who had experienced only one placement. The participants came from a broad range of counties in California.

The interviews typically lasted 45 minutes. Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed. While the interviews varied somewhat depending on the person being interviewed and his or her life circumstances, each interview followed a basic outline of questions:

- Where are you presently living? How long have you been/were you in the system?
- What were the circumstances that led to you first encountering the child welfare system?
- Who have been the people most important to you in your life?
- How long have you had a relationship with them?
- When you hear the word permanency, or the phrase "lifelong connection," what does that mean to you?*
- Do the distinctions between physical permanency, relational permanency, and legal permanency make sense to you? How would you describe the differences between each? Which is most important? Why?
- Do you have a relationship in your life now that feels like it is permanent, or like it will be a lifelong connection? With whom?
- How did you come to be in this relationship? What was good about this process?
- What could have been improved? What do you like about this relationship?
- What difficulties do you have in this relationship, if any?
- What changes or improvements would you like to see in the system beyond those you have already described? Why are these important to you?
- Would you be willing to be part of a group conversation discussing some of these issues?

Nine of the young people who were interviewed participated in the December 2003 focus group. Every young person interviewed expressed an interest in participating in the focus group; scheduling conflicts prevented those who did not attend from participating. The 9 young people who participated in the focus group were a representative cross-section of the 25 young people who were interviewed. The focus group lasted 3 hours, and explored several overarching questions:

- Do the distinctions between physical permanency, relational permanency, and legal permanency make sense to you? How would you describe the differences between each?*
- Which is most important? Why?
- What changes or improvements would you like to see in the child welfare system?
- Why are these changes important to you?

**The definitions of three kinds of permanence were arbitrary. The separation of emotional (relational), physical and legal permanency was not meant to be a dichotomous structure, but turned out to be. The either/or nature of the questions might have encouraged youth to structure their responses in a similarly either/or manner.*

California Permanency for Youth Project

Director, Pat Reynolds-Harris
Project Consultants, Mardi Louisell and Jim Brown
Program Administrator, Margot Simmons
Program Evaluator, Elizabeth Iida, Ph.D.

The California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP) started January 2003 as a result of a three year grant awarded by the Stuart Foundation.

Project Vision:

To achieve permanency for older children and youth in California so that no youth leaves foster care without a lifelong connection to a caring adult.

Project Objectives:

To increase awareness among the child welfare agencies and staff, legislators and judicial officers in the State of California of the urgent need that older children and youth have for permanency;
To influence public policy and administrative practices so that they promote permanency;
To assist four specific counties and the private agencies with which they work to implement new practices to achieve permanency for older children and youth.

Project Activities:

The Permanency for Youth Task Force is a statewide group with broad representation, including public and private organizations, youth and funders. It grew out of the 2002 Convening on Youth Permanency.

Task Force objectives are:

- To facilitate collaborations between public and private agencies to achieve permanent lifelong connections for youth in the system;
- To create opportunities for key stakeholders (who affect outcomes for youth in the system)
  a. to realize the need for permanent lifelong connections for youth
  b. to understand that it is possible to achieve these connections;
- To identify and overcome structural barriers (within the system affecting youth) that prevent achieving permanent lifelong connections; and
- To promote public relations, education and advocacy efforts that will address the needs of youth for permanent lifelong connections.

In November 2003, CPYP received a grant from the Walter S. Johnson Foundation to pursue the partnership objectives of the Task Force. The grant supports the development of three workgroups to address issues of partnership between public child welfare agencies and **a.** the courts, **b.** group homes and **c.** adoption/family foster agencies. The groups will make recommendations on how effective partnerships can accomplish improved permanency outcomes for foster youth.

Technical Assistance to Counties

The project works with four counties, San Mateo, Alameda, Stanislaus, and Monterey, to develop programs to achieve permanency for more youth. County teams include representatives from the Independent Living Skills Program, Family Reunification, Foster Care, Adoption and private agency partner(s), as well as significant youth involvement. The project a) provides counties with technical assistance over two and a half years as they strengthen their efforts and b) will document significant lessons about implementation useful to the field. Each county has developed a youth permanence plan that includes the following target areas: administrative practices, permanency practice, identification of project target group, staff development, partnerships, and integration with other initiatives.

Training

A curriculum on Permanency for Youth will be developed and made available to all public child welfare agencies in the state. The project has supported the development of "Digital Stories" by current and former foster youth which will be used for training purposes.

Convenings

As a part of the development of CPYP project, a national convening was held in April 2002 to explore the issues of permanency for youth. As a follow-up another convening was held in April 2003 and a third national convening will be held in April, 2004. The project will also hold California convenings to promote partnerships to assist the state in accomplishing permanent lifelong connections for youth in its systems, i.e., group homes, mental health, foster family agencies, adoption agencies and the courts.

Advisory Committee

The project has a nine member advisory committee consisting of several young adults who are former foster youth, public and private agency representatives, a funder and a legislative representative.

Evaluation

To measure results, CPYP is establishing a baseline with each county and then comparing the growth in that number against the targets set for the project. In addition, the project is doing a formative evaluation of each county's implementation process that will inform the field of strategies for implementation and change.

Contact

California Permanency for Youth Project
4200 Park Blvd., PMB 273
Oakland, CA 94602
Phone: 510 - 268-0038 / Fax: 510 - 663-8441
Website: http://www.cpyp.org

California Youth Connection (CYC)

CYC was the logical choice when the California Permanency for Youth Project decided that it wanted information on youth's perspective on permanency.

California Youth Connection (CYC) is a statewide foster youth empowerment and advocacy organization that is guided, focused and driven by current and former foster youth, ages 14-24. With 23 chapters and over 450 members statewide, CYC is a microcosm of California's foster care youth. CYC members are foster youth from every lifestyle with every foster care experience represented: long term foster care, guardianship, adoption, youth with children, youth receiving mental health services, youth in the juvenile justice system and more.

CYC was founded on the concept of youth empowerment. The CYC philosophy is that foster youth, as recipients of child welfare services, are the leading experts in the child welfare field and need to have input in the decisions made about the foster care system. In accordance with the CYC Philosophy, CYC members participate in every aspect of leadership and decision-making within the organization.

Contact

California Youth Connection
604 Mission St. 9th floor, San Francisco, CA 94105
Phone: 415- 442-5060 / Fax: 415- 442-0720
Website: http://www.calyouthconn.org

Final Reflections

"We need to think about kids like me, who, much
as they want love, have been hurt in their lives.
If there is a permanent relationship
trying to be built, they will try
and burn it down because it is a test."

"I want a loving person to give and accept,
to truly understand me. My heart is lonely
and my soul is crying."

"It's wonderful to be a part of the
renaissance scholars program with youth
who are kindred spirits.
Because we have all gone through
loneliness and come out by ourselves."

"That permanency on all three different levels
is being questioned
in the system is a wonderful idea.
We are all here,
and we are all being asked what we need
and how the system is being improved.
Who better to tell you
what you think is better for them
than the youth?"