



ENSURING PERMANENCY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM
NATIONAL FOSTER YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL

Members of the National Foster Youth Advisory Council (NFYAC) believe that every young person in the foster care system is entitled to a wide array of supports, resources and opportunities to ensure permanency in their lives.

We believe that all young people in foster care need:

- Compassionate, committed adults who are willing to be life long connections;
- A safe and stable place to call home;
- Opportunities to develop permanent connections in their lives;
- To work in partnership with their social worker and/or case manager to develop an effective transition plan that includes permanency;
- Access to resources, services and financial supports to promote permanent connections.

Members of the National Foster Youth Advisory Council convened in May of 2005 to address the challenges that young people in the foster care system face with regard to permanency. NFYAC members were asked to define permanency for themselves, share some of their experiences while in foster care and provide recommendations for ensuring permanency for youth in the foster care system.

Family supports and social connections are critical to a young person's wellbeing. Young people in the foster care system need permanent connections while they are in care but also well beyond their discharge from the system. Unfortunately, high turn-over in staffing, limited access to mentors and role models, and multiple placements often impact a young person's ability to obtain and maintain solid, permanent connections in his or her life. Studies indicate a low level of family support for older youth in care, particularly for those young people in group care settings (Kressler, 2004). In an effort to create successful transitions into adulthood, it is essential to assist young people in foster care to develop and sustain life-long connections. NFYAC members

believe that with a solid case plan and reliable supports and connections, young people in foster care can successfully obtain permanency.

NFYAC's Top Ten Recommendations for Ensuring Permanency for Youth in Foster Care

Provide me with life long connections.

Unfortunately, young people in foster care lack social and familial supports. Youth in the foster care system face long periods of instability during their time in the foster care system. Almost all NFYAC members indicated that they did not feel they had permanency while in foster care or after they were discharged. One NFYAC member indicated that he had absolutely no connections to anyone when he was discharged from care. Several NFYAC members stated that had it not been for their casemanagers, they would have been alone. Fortunately, other NFYAC members were able to rely on their foster parents for support.

Foster parents often play a significant role in the lives of foster youth after they are discharged from care. Research has indicated that as many as 40% of youth communicate with their foster parents weekly.

No young person should age out of the foster care system without life long connections.

Make sure that I have a place to call home.

Every young person is entitled to a place to call home - a place where he or she feels secure, safe and wanted. Unfortunately, many young people in the foster care system feel as though they do not have a home. Young people aging out of the foster care system are often faced with limited options, such as "couch surfing" and virtual homelessness, with no place to stay during the holidays and summer breaks. It is difficult for young people to focus on anything beyond immediate and day-to-day survival without a permanent place to call home. *No foster youth should leave foster care without a place to call home.*

Create a bridge for us beyond discharge.

Young people in the foster care system need permanent support beyond discharge. Although relationships with mentors and role models improve behavioral, social and educational outcomes for youth, young people in the foster care system need permanent connections beyond discharge. NFYAC members indicated how important it is to have access to supports and resources beyond the time that they exit the system. The goal should not be independence, but *interdependence*, according to one NFYAC member. While the child welfare system may only be committed and legally responsible for a young person until the age of discharge, it is important to remember that life goes on for a foster youth. Just like their peers, they also need connections and supports on which they can depend. They need to have someone to call in case of emergency or just to share good news. Like everyone else, they need to have positive

ongoing connections throughout a lifetime. *No young person should age out of foster care without supports that extend beyond the time of discharge.*

All foster youth deserve help – even the resilient ones.

Young people in the foster care system are resilient and possess many strengths and assets. However, foster youth that are doing well often feel like they are overlooked. One NFYAC member indicated that because she was doing well in school and in her placement (i.e.: not pregnant and not on drugs), her case manager did not give her as much attention as other foster youth that were in crisis. NFYAC members want casemanagers to understand that just because a youth is not in crisis does not mean that he/she doesn't require attention or help. *No foster youth should ever feel that they don't have a helping hand.*

Create safety nets to catch me before I fall.

Many foster youth feel alone not only while in foster care but after their discharge. Unlike their peers, they often feel like they do not have anything in place in case of emergency. Instead, they are forced to rely only on themselves. One NFYAC member indicated she has learned to invest in and rely solely on herself; she has some money set aside just in case her housing situation becomes tenuous and she needs to stay in a hotel for awhile. Unfortunately, foster youth are not only faced with tough economic times, but also the added pressure of making ends meet without extra supports or resources. *No foster youth should be left to depend on themselves without access to resources or supports.*

Help me maintain connections with my biological family, especially my siblings, if possible.

Many foster youth leave the foster care system only to return or reconnect with their biological families. One NFYAC member reflects that she could have relied on her biological family as a resource had she been more prepared to deal with them appropriately. Other members indicated they would have liked to have more ongoing contact and visitations with their biological families, including their siblings.

Connections with siblings are very important to youth in foster care. Young people in foster care have the right to see their siblings and these vital connections should not be denied simply because of their involvement with the child welfare system. Lack of sibling and family contact makes it difficult for young people to obtain and maintain permanency. *No foster youth should leave foster care ill prepared to connect with their biological family.*

Let me speak up and voice my opinion.

Young people want to be given the opportunity to participate in developing their permanency plan and permanent connections. Foster youth should work in partnership with caseworkers to develop a strategy and plan for defining and achieving permanency. Many NFYAC members indicated that they did not feel heard while in foster care. Although some NFYAC members felt like the judges on their case heard their concerns, most of the other members did not feel like they could speak up. Young people in foster care want to be heard and want to ask questions – LET THEM! *No foster youth should feel like their voice is not important.*

Don't punish me for obtaining permanency.

Although most foster youth lack connections while in foster care fortunately, there are some youth who manage to obtain permanency – either through adoption, kinship care or family reunification. One NFYAC member indicated that she has encountered cases where youth have not been able to obtain benefits because they have obtained permanency. For example, some educational institutions are not aware that former foster youth are still eligible for benefits. *No foster youth should ever feel punished for obtaining permanency in their lives.*

Work with me to ensure that permanency is part of my case plan.

Casemanagers and social workers need to work in partnership with young people in the foster care system to ensure not only a solid case plan but also a successful transition plan. This includes securing safe, stable, and affordable housing, developing a budget, and teaching the life skills necessary for a young person to live on their own but ALSO ensuring that he or she is connected to dedicated, committed and understanding adults. *No young person should leave foster care without a solid, effective transition plan.*

Permanency is different for everyone – One size does NOT fit all.

When asked to define permanency, NFYAC members shared words such as “life-long connections, a crutch, or a person, place or thing that will remain constant.” After a long discussion it was clear to everyone that there is no one definition for permanency. Permanency is unique to every young person in the foster care system.