

Frequently Asked Questions about Youth Permanency

What does “permanency” mean?

Permanency is both a process and a result that includes involvement of the youth as a participant or leader in finding a permanent connection with at least one committed adult who provides:

- a safe, stable and secure parenting relationship
- love
- unconditional commitment
- lifelong support in the context of reunification, a legal adoption, or guardianship, where possible, and in which the youth has the opportunity to maintain contacts with important persons including brothers and sisters

A broad array of permanency options exist; reunification and adoption are an important two among many that may be appropriate.

What is a permanent connection?

An adult who consistently states and demonstrates that she or he has entered an unconditional, lifelong parent-like relationship with the youth. The youth agrees that the adult will play this role in his or her life.

What’s the problem?

3,500 youth emancipate from the child welfare system in California each year, most without a lifelong adult connection. The older the child, the less likely she or he will find a permanent family. The rate of adoption for African American children is considerably lower than that for White or Hispanic children. National studies reveal that after age eight, the probability of adoptive placement plummets. Many children spend ten more years in foster care, only to emancipate without permanency at age 18.

What happens to them?

Even with the Independent Living services now available, emancipating foster youth often have difficulty finding employment and have high rates of homelessness and public assistance. If they make it to college, they have no place to stay during breaks – some live in their cars. Youth often come to the attention of the adult public mental health system – not having a permanent connection and stable support system, naturally, can increase depression, anxiety and other emotional problems.

Why is it so hard for youth to find permanency?

Some adults think teens should be separating from adults, not connecting with them. Others are uncomfortable raising the subject of permanency with youth. Some adults think youth don’t want to be adopted, while others believe that no one would want to adopt them. Some agencies don’t focus on finding non-nuclear family, some don’t recruit parents for teens. For some, youth permanency as an idea is not widely understood.

Do foster youth want to be adopted?

Many foster youth welcome a permanent adoptive family connection. But youth who have been in foster care a long time have experienced multiple losses and traumas and may require counseling. They definitely need support, preparation and an agency committed to finding permanent homes for them. While some youth who have permanent connections that work for them say they don’t want to be adopted, Mark Courtney, Ph.D., writing in “The Foster Youth Transition to Adulthood,” reports that 41% of emancipated foster youth say they wish they had been adopted. (Mark Courtney, Irving Piliavin, Andrew Grogan-Kaylor, and Ande Nesmith, “Foster Youth Transitions to Adulthood: A Longitudinal View of Youth Leaving Care,” *Child Welfare* 80, no. 6 (2001): 685-717.)

But are there adults who will adopt teens?

Yes! Teens in foster homes, group homes and residential treatment have found permanency when they are involved in the process and when practices suited to teens are used. In California, some counties and adoption agencies now use models with outstanding track records to find permanency for youth through reunification with birth parents, adoption by extended family or persons special to the youth, as well as through guardianship and other models.