A Toolkit for Child Welfare Professionals to Achieve Permanency and Stability for Youth in Foster Care
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A publication of Youth Fostering Change, created during the 2017-2018 Youth Advocacy Program year, in collaboration with Juvenile Law Center staff.


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Juvenile Law Center advocates for rights, dignity, equity and opportunity for youth in the foster care and justice systems.

Founded in 1975, Juvenile Law Center is the first non-profit, public interest law firm for children in the country. We fight for youth through litigation, appellate advocacy and submission of amicus (friend-of-the-court) briefs, policy reform, public education, training, consulting, and strategic communications. Widely published and internationally recognized as leaders in the field, Juvenile Law Center has substantially shaped the development of law and policy on behalf of youth. We strive to ensure that laws, policies, and practices affecting youth advance racial and economic equity and are rooted in research, consistent with children’s unique developmental characteristics, and reflective of international human rights values. For more information about Juvenile Law Center’s work, visit www.jlc.org.

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FOSTERING CHANGE

Youth Fostering Change (YFC) is an advocacy program for youth who are currently or formerly involved in the child welfare system. Each year, YFC researches issues affecting youth in foster care and analyzes current advocacy strategies. Youth advocates then determine a strategy to address the issue, including developing policy recommendations and a campaign to raise awareness of the issue and YFC’s work.

We believe in the power of youth voice. Young people are experts on their own lives, and their lived experiences should inform policies that affect them. Since 2008, Juvenile Law Center’s Youth Advocacy Program has prepared young people ages 15-22 to lead advocacy and policy reform efforts in their local communities and beyond. Youth advocates develop leadership skills, political knowledge, communication and storytelling skills, and a sense of community. By sharing their personal experiences, youth advocates affect policy change through advocacy, media outreach, and public education.

SPECIAL THANKS

We would like to thank the Department of Human Services in Philadelphia for supporting our projects each year and the Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network (SWAN) for meeting with us and supporting our project. Thanks to Juvenile Law Center staff for constantly working alongside us to uplift our stories and create projects to help better the system for ALL youth.
ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

Background

Across the country, over 20,000 youth age out of care each year without permanent family connections and stability. Within 18 months of aging out, 40-50% of former foster youth become homeless.

In Pennsylvania, 8,639 (33%) of the state’s foster care population are between ages 14 and 21, generally referred to as “transition age youth.” Almost half (49%) of Pennsylvania’s transition age youth age out without being reunified or connected to a permanent family. This means thousands of young people are leaving the state’s care without adequate support, a loving family, or the resources and people necessary for them to grow into thriving adults.

What’s in This Toolkit?

Many of us aged out without family or supportive connections, or we are about to leave the system without gaining permanency and are uncertain about our lives after foster care. We believe all youth deserve permanency and supportive adult connections—both are essential to success in adulthood.

Based on what we know about our own stories and those of our peers in foster care, we created a toolkit and recommendations to improve permanency outcomes for children in foster care, regardless of circumstances or age. This publication identifies some of the challenges we faced or are still facing as older youth in care.

This toolkit is for social workers, advocates, case workers, and other professionals to support youth in care to achieve permanency. This toolkit includes the definition and legal obligations for permanency planning, as well as tools and best practices for working with youth to achieve permanency. We developed these materials based on our experiences in care and with aging out of the system.

We want you to understand that youth want permanency and family—and we need your help to achieve it! No matter our age, permanency should be continuously sought. We need you to believe that we deserve permanency and to work creatively alongside us to make it a reality. We hope this guide is useful for you to better connect with youth and support youth in foster care to find family.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across the country, over 20,000 youth age out of foster care annually without permanent family connections or stability. Within 18 months of aging out, 40-50% of former foster youth become homeless.

In Pennsylvania, 8,639 (33%) of the state’s foster care population are between ages 14 and 21, generally referred to as “transition age youth.” Almost half (49%) of Pennsylvania’s transition age youth age out without being reunified or connected to a permanent family. This means thousands of young people are leaving the state’s care without adequate support, a loving family, or the resources and people necessary for them to grow into thriving adults.

Many members of Youth Fostering Change aged out without family or supportive connections. Some of us are about to leave the system without permanency. We are uncertain about our lives and futures. Our goal is to improve permanency outcomes for children in foster care, regardless of circumstances or age.

We believe all youth in foster care deserve permanency and supportive adult connections—both are essential to success in adulthood. This toolkit is based on our own experiences in care and with aging out. This toolkit is for social workers, advocates, case workers, and other child welfare professionals to further support their work to achieve meaningful legal permanency and relational permanency. It includes the definition and obligations for legal permanency planning, as well as tools and best practices for working with youth to achieve permanency.

We want to help child welfare professionals enhance permanency planning and improve outcomes for all youth in foster care. We recommend using this toolkit as a guide before client meetings as well as throughout the duration of a case in order to fully leverage the tools, tips, and best practices. We believe that using these tools will strengthen your advocacy and will allow you to build relationships for youth and reach the best permanency outcome.

We hope this guide is useful for you to better connect with and support youth. As alumni and current youth in the system, we need professionals to understand that youth want permanency and family—and we need your help to achieve it! We know you believe that youth of any age deserve permanency, and we want you to keep working creatively with us to make it a reality for ALL youth in foster care.

The following summary of our recommendations are based on our experiences and are explained in more detail in the toolkit.
1. Communicate the Importance of Permanency
Youth deserve respect: make sure to explain what permanency is and why it’s important, and listen to their views and concerns. In addition, be mindful of trauma and adolescent development when communicating about a youth’s case planning and when building relationships with supportive adults.

2. Meaningfully Engage Youth in Their Permanency Planning
To be successful in permanency planning, youth need to be on board, invested, and clear about their permanency goals. Engaging youth starts with including them in discussions and preparing them for planning meetings. Think about how meetings are planned, including the logistics for youth to attend and fully participate.

3. Facilitate Placement Stability
Youth need to feel safe in placements. They deserve stable living arrangements where they are secure, treated with respect, cared for, and loved. Youth need to know about their new placement or placement changes in advance, including the location, when they will arrive, with whom they will stay, and the placement type.

4. Cultivate Youth’s Connections with Kin
Youth need help staying connected with family. Research shows that many youth who age out turn to family for support. Family separation causes trauma and grief, and maintaining family connections is important for emotional health and well-being. Consider reunification, and if it isn’t an option, youth may still want those relationships.

5. Focus on Relational Permanency and Legal Permanency
Youth want legal permanency when possible, but having a network of consistent, supportive relationships that last past aging-out of care is just as important. Most people don’t have just one person who provides all the support they will ever need. If youth have the option of multiple supportive adults, then youth can have all the support that they need.

6. Follow the Family Finding Requirements
Family finding is a great way to identify people who can provide different types of support for youth to achieve permanency. State law requires annual family finding work; ideally this process starts early and increasingly involves youth as they age. Work with youth during family finding, so they can identify supportive connections and develop a plan for how to involve and reach out to the adult.

7. Ensure a Comprehensive Transition Plan Is in Place, Including Direct Connections to Services and Resources
Regardless of a youth’s permanency goal, transition plans are vital to youth entering adulthood. Without a solid plan, youth tend to focus on short-term rather than long-term goals. Developing a transition plan with youth that includes connections to people, skill-building, and resources is essential for their stability.
Transition Age Youth in Pennsylvania

The Facts

- 33% of PA's foster youth are transition age youth
- 47% of transition age youth are in group homes or institutions
- 49% age out of care, instead of being connected to family
- 25% of transition age youth have been in 2+ placements while in care
- 42% of have been in 3+ placements

By Age 21...

- 8,639 youth
- 37% experience homelessness or unstable housing
- Just 44% of transition age youth have full or part-time employment
- Only 75% earn a GED or high school diploma, compared to 92% of their peers

We have the tools to change the story for transition age youth.
What is “Permanency”?

The term “permanency” is often used to refer to the final legal outcome of a dependency case, such as reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship.

The concept of permanency, however, is actually much broader, including both “legal permanency” (a permanent family relationship recognized by the law) and “relational permanency,” or lifelong relationships that support physical, emotional, and social well-being.

Put simply, “permanency” refers to enduring family relationships that are supportive, legally recognized, and meant to last a lifetime.

**We need you to believe we deserve permanency, especially if we lose hope that it can be achieved.**

**HOW YOUTH FOSTERING CHANGE DEFINES PERMANENCY:**

We believe permanency and the process to achieve permanency should actively include youth, recognize adolescent development, and include best practices for every youth’s plan.

We define permanency as having supportive adult connections, not just a place to live. Permanency provides youth a series of relationships that:

- Provide the same support that family members would provide,
- Provide emotional support and guidance,
- Provide unconditional love,
- Help youth build and learn skills,
- Encourage skills, talents, and potential for the future, and
- Provide a home and help youth with resources, like help to make ends meet, a place to stay for holidays or emergencies, or just someone to call.
Components of Permanency Planning Process to Support Youth Development:

- Start the process to identify permanent supportive adults as soon as youth enter care.
- Help us learn how to be thriving young adults and receive support from our team.
- Involve us in every step of the permanency planning process; help us understand what is going on in our case, even if it might upset us, and let us have input in goal-setting.
- Search our case files and help us think about our history so we can identify caring adults.
- Help us understand concurrent planning so we can try to develop multiple plans and back-up plans all at the same time.
- Follow up and follow through with the steps established in meetings. It helps us trust you and believe in the plan we are working on together.
- Do not give up on us! For many of us, APPLA was overused when case workers gave up on finding us homes because of our behavior or because we were deemed “too old.”
- Believe we deserve family, and tell us that we deserve family—even if we act like we do not believe you!
While each child and professional may think about permanency differently, there are certain requirements that professionals must meet when assisting youth in the planning process. One such requirement is following a permanency hierarchy. For young people, permanency isn’t just a word on a case plan—it is our lives.

Please note that this is not an exhaustive list of legal rights for youth in the child welfare system in the United States or in Pennsylvania. This toolkit includes other legal obligations listed throughout the publication.

**Limitations on APPLA**

APPLA stands for “Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement.” It is the least preferred plan. In the past, it has been overused for older youth and usually means youth will age out without achieving permanency. Recent changes in federal law greatly reduce the use of APPLA. The law now prohibits the use of APPLA as a permanency plan for youth under age 16. 42 U.S.C.A. § 675(5)(C)(i). For youth age 16 or older, the child welfare agency must meet many requirements before it can select the permanency goal of APPLA to ensure it is used rarely. To select or maintain the plan of APPLA, the court must make specific findings that:

- The agency has documented the intensive, ongoing, unsuccessful efforts to achieve reunification, adoption, guardianship, or placement with a fit and willing relative;
- APPLA is the best permanency plan for the child and there is a compelling reason it is not in the best interest of the youth to return home, be placed for adoption, enter a guardianship agreement, or be placed with a fit and willing relative;
- Both the agency and the court have asked the youth about his or her desired permanency outcome; and
- The agency is taking steps to ensure that the reasonable and prudent parent standard is being exercised and that the child has regular and ongoing opportunities to engage in age- or developmentally-appropriate activities. 42 U.S.C.A. § 675a(a).
Permanency hearings must continue every six months even after a goal of APPLA is assigned. Pennsylvania law goes beyond the federal requirements, mandating that, for youth with a goal of APPLA, the county agency must identify at least one significant connection with a supportive adult willing to be involved in the child’s life as the child transitions to adulthood, or document that efforts have been made to identify a supportive adult. The court must also make findings that the significant connection is identified in the permanency plan or that efforts have been made to identify a supportive adult, if no one is currently identified. 42 Pa. C.S.A. § 6351(f.1)(5).

Connecting Youth with Family
Federal and state law support placement with family and kin. Reunification is the most preferred permanency plan, and placement with kin is preferred if a youth does enter the child welfare system.

Federal law requires reasonable efforts to place siblings together and to provide for frequent visitation when siblings are not jointly placed. 42 U.S.C. § 671(a)(31). Pennsylvania law goes even further, requiring that siblings be placed together unless it is contrary to the safety or well-being of either sibling. If siblings cannot be placed together, Pennsylvania law requires visitation be provided at least two times per month. 42 Pa. C.S.A. § 6351(b)(5) & (b.1).

Involvement of Youth in Permanency Planning
Beginning at age 14, the youth must be consulted in the development of the case plan and must be allowed to involve two individuals in case planning who are not a foster parent or part of the casework staff. 42 U.S.C.A. § 675(5)(C)(iv).

Reasonable Efforts to Finalize the Permanency Plan
The court must make a finding at least once a year that reasonable efforts are being made to finalize the child’s permanency plan. 42 U.S.C. § 671(a)(15). In Pennsylvania, youth have permanency hearings at least twice per year. At each hearing, the court must review the permanency plan and the progress that is being made to achieve it. 42 Pa. C.S.A. § 6351(e).

Least Restrictive Placement
States must ensure each child in the custody of the child welfare system has a case plan designed to achieve placement in a safe setting that is the least restrictive (most family-like) and most appropriate setting available. 42 U.S.C. § 675(5)(A)(1). This means youth should be in family settings in the community—not in group homes or institutional care.
Tool 1: Talking about Permanency with Youth

GOAL: HAVE CONSTRUCTIVE DISCUSSIONS ABOUT PERMANENCY

It’s important to speak directly with youth to learn what they want and need in a family. If a young person appears to reject the idea of permanency, explore why they may be hesitant about it rather than ending the conversation.

WHY IT’S IMPORTANT

Youth need to be understood on their own terms and be talked to in a way that is respectful and considerate of how they understand their situations, their histories, and their ability to process information as a young adult.

Try to understand the youth’s unique, individual experience and why they may be unwilling to trust adults at first. Always strive to have good relationships with youth; communicate patiently and in ways that build their understanding of permanency and the planning process. When professionals develop trusting relationships with youth, it is easier to work together on achieving permanency.

OUR EXPERIENCES

- Feeling that our presence at meetings wasn’t acknowledged.
- Our team didn’t follow up or action steps were unclear.
- Not communicating in a youth-friendly way about how we were doing.
- Having our comments disregarded or ignored.
- Feeling disrespected.
- Not feeling heard or feeling our attempts to speak up were futile.
- Struggling to trust or love adults, making positive communication a challenge for us.
DID YOU KNOW

The court should consult with the child in an age-appropriate manner regarding the proposed permanency and transition plans. 42 U.S.C.A. § 675(5)(C)(iii).

Youth age 14 and over must be provided with a list of rights regarding education, health, visitation, and court participation; the right to discharge documents; and the right to stay safe and avoid exploitation. 42 U.S.C.A. § 675a(b)(1) & (b)(2).

BEST PRACTICES

• Build a relationship based on trust to ensure there is open communication between you and the young person.
• Have a conversation with youth about the meaning of permanency and the planning process. Explain concepts in a youth-friendly way and use examples.
• Talk to youth about the importance of their participation in permanency planning.
• If youth have concerns or questions, answer in a meaningful way and make time to answer their questions.
• Work with the young person to develop incentives for participation, such as a reward system to recognize and acknowledge their participation in the meetings. Encourage youth to consistently attend meetings.

Most of us did not understand what permanency was or the purpose of the meetings. We were left in the dark about what permanency is and the process to achieve it.
Tool 2: Engaging Youth in Permanency Planning Meetings and Dependency Court Hearings

GOAL: ACTIVELY AND CONTINUOUSLY ENGAGE YOUTH IN THE PLANNING PROCESS

This includes scheduling meetings that work with the youth’s schedule and ensuring youth can attend and are fully engaged during the meetings. Always follow up with youth after each permanency planning meeting.

WHY IT’S IMPORTANT

Youth deserve to understand the structure and purpose of their permanency meetings. This includes knowing who will attend, informing youth they can bring supportive adults, and giving youth many opportunities to share their preferred permanency goals. Youth deserve to understand and be fully engaged throughout the process because of its immeasurable impact on their lives and futures.

OUR EXPERIENCES

- Meetings were scheduled without our consideration.
- There were a lot of meetings, and we sometimes had to miss school to attend.
- The meeting’s purpose wasn’t always clearly explained to us.
- No prep from our team before the meetings, so we couldn’t meaningfully participate.
- Transportation wasn’t reliable or available for us to get to the meetings.
- The meeting outcomes didn’t reflect what we want or need.
- We did not know who would attend, and this affected our willingness to participate.

BEST PRACTICES

- Make sure youth know they can bring people they care about to the planning meetings, and help youth identify these individuals.
- Create a plan to ensure youth can attend permanency meetings, including regularly reminding youth about upcoming meetings. It’s important to speak directly with the youth to remind them about a meeting.
- Ask if youth want help preparing for meetings and debrief with them after meetings.
- Give youth advance notice of who will attend and participate (including biological parents), and explain each person’s role in the meeting.
If we attended our permanency meetings, we did not feel engaged, and our desires and concerns were not addressed. Many meetings were scheduled without us, and we did not understand everyone’s role in the meeting.

- Ensure all meetings begin with positive updates about the youth.
- Set a youth-friendly agenda that ensures youth understand the discussion and goals of the meeting (for example, talk slowly and avoid jargon).
- If specific action steps are brought up during the meeting, highlight them at the end of the meeting and then follow up.

FOR DEPENDENCY COURT HEARINGS:

- Meaningfully engage youth in their hearings and make sure they have opportunities to speak in court.
- Give youth multiple opportunities to prepare for court, including meeting with their attorney and case manager to discuss what to expect; this should be done in a way youth understand.

DID YOU KNOW

Transportation is often a challenge for youth to attend meetings. Professionals should arrange adequate transportation so that youth can attend meetings.

YFC developed tools to help youth prepare for court with their attorney and understand their rights in court in P.A. To learn more go to: https://at.jlc.org/YFC-youthincourt.
Tool 3: Facilitating Placement Stability to Gain Permanency

GOAL: SUPPORT YOUTH TO MAINTAIN PLACEMENT STABILITY

To achieve placement stability, youth need caseworkers who listen to them, help them problem solve when things are not going well, and respond when a youth is not being treated appropriately in a placement.

Speak with youth directly to learn what they want and need in a family, and if youth appear to reject the idea of permanency, explore why youth may be hesitant instead of ending the conversation.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Placement stability allows youth time to develop relationships with people in their community. Communicate with youth about how they feel about their placement, and identify and follow up with youth about any challenges—both are key to building rapport and achieving placement stability.

Youth have a better chance at gaining permanency when they are in a consistent placement where they are respected, listened to, and provided with necessary resources.

OUR EXPERIENCES

- Feeling unsafe in placements.
- Placement conditions were not appropriate for us.
- Running away from placements due to harsh conditions or to see biological family and other kin.
- Trouble connecting with adults in placements.
- Being placed in residential treatment facilities and group homes for too long—we should have been in homes.
- Placement changes without explanation.
- Being removed from a placement instead of getting help with problem-solving or conflict resolution.
- Not feeling believed when we revealed poor treatment in placements.
- Fearing the next placement would be worse and not disclosing poor treatment at our current placement.
Feeling unsafe or not connecting with foster families led to more placement disruptions.

Some of us experienced unsafe conditions and abusive foster families or group homes. We lost trust and hope for finding a loving, family or supportive adults.

BEST PRACTICES

- Understand and be attentive to youth who identify challenges in placements and work with them to resolve the challenges.
- Match youth in homes that better fit them and their identified goals.
- Have an introduction with youth and the families before placing them, even if this must happen the first day of placement.
- Use the “Teen Success Agreement” to set house rules and resolve disagreements.
- Train caregivers and facility staff on understanding trauma, foster care, and adolescent development.
- Actively engage foster parents in the permanency planning process with youth to build connections between the youth and family.
- Work with the family and youth on de-escalation and constructive communication.
- Consistently tell youth that you want to know if they are being treated badly, and respond when they raise concerns.
- Communicate that youth deserve to be treated well, and that it is unacceptable when a youth says a placement is “not that bad!”
Tool 4: Cultivating Connections with Biological Family

GOAL: MAINTAIN FAMILY AND KIN CONNECTIONS

Another key to achieving permanency is maintaining a youth’s established permanent connections with biologically family and kin. Prioritize these relationships when youth enter care, and support youth to communicate and engage with family.

WHY IT’S IMPORTANT

Entering care can be traumatic. Youth can be separated from their siblings, family, and kin—experiencing grief and losing family connections. Youth care about their family members even if they may not be able to provide for the young person.

Cultivating these family relationships while a youth is in care is essential to their mental, physical, and emotional health and well-being.

Maintaining these connections helps young people feel a sense of community and can lead to a better chance of leaving care with multiple supportive connections.

OUR EXPERIENCES

- We lost connections with our siblings and weren’t supported to maintain the relationships.
- No assistance maintaining relationships with our relatives who couldn’t provide placement.
- No support for relationships with relatives who were important to us because the agency did not think they were a good influence.
- Running away and going to our biological parents or families’ homes.
- Losing relationships if we or our siblings were adopted.
- Feeling anger, grief, and loss from family separation and struggling to adjust, even in supportive placements.

During our time in care, our workers didn’t acknowledge our existing family. Specifically, we felt that if identified kin couldn’t provide certain things for us—like placement—we didn’t get support to build or maintain those connections.
DID YOU KNOW

Federal law requires reasonable efforts to place siblings together and to provide for frequent visitation when siblings are not jointly placed. 42 U.S.C. § 671(a)(31).

Pennsylvania law goes even further, requiring that siblings be placed together unless it is contrary to the safety or well-being of either sibling. If siblings cannot be placed together, Pennsylvania law requires that visitation be provided at least two times per month. 42 Pa. C.S.A. § 6351(b)(5) & (b.1).

BEST PRACTICES

- Work with youth to identify, connect with, and maintain relationships with biological family and extended kin and relatives.
- At minimum, support youth to reach out and connect to biological family and kin.
- Assist youth with maintaining these connections, including providing transportation and support for how to stay connected with family.
- Arrange sibling visits more frequently than Pennsylvania’s minimum legal requirement (twice a month). This helps youth to maintain sibling relationships.
- Use the SWAN Child Profile to help youth learn about their biological families and history so they can better understand and identify other family connections. The SWAN Child Profile is an in-depth summary of the child’s life history.
Tool 5: Identifying, Initiating, and Maintaining Relationships with Supportive Adults and Kin

GOAL: SUPPORT YOUTH TO IDENTIFY AND MAINTAIN CONNECTIONS WITH SUPPORTIVE ADULTS

Youth in care should also have connections with supportive adults in their lives. These include relatives and people who the young person identifies as important to them (kin) as well as relationships that professionals help youth develop through permanency services such as child-specific recruitment.

WHY IT’S IMPORTANT

When youth have a network of supportive adults, they have access to more people who can support them in different ways. It is vital that youth have people in their lives who they can count on and go to when things get hard. Youth need people who can help them grow into successful adults, and they need support from their child welfare team to develop and maintain these relationships. This work grows the young person’s network and also contributes to their success after foster care.

OUR EXPERIENCES

- We lost connections with supportive adults who were in our lives before care.
- Constantly moving placements caused us to lose contact or limited our ability to build lasting relationships.
- We struggled to build and maintain connections with supportive adults due to mistrusting others because of our experiences.
- We didn’t get the emotional or logistical support to connect to supportive adults.
- We didn’t always know who the supportive adults were in our lives or how they could help us.
- We aged out of care without any supportive adult connections.
- When we had help building and maintaining connections with supportive adults, it helped us grow and created opportunities for us.
BEST PRACTICES

• Identify supportive adults and talk about the importance of this support throughout a youth’s time in care.
• Use the youth’s case file and family finding technology to identify connections.
• Ask youth about adults who are important to them.
• Explain that youth can be connected to supportive adults in different ways, and ask youth about the types of relationships they would like to have. Remind them that not all connections have to be placements.
• Ask what you can do to help youth connect to supportive adults and to maintain those relationships, including with family.
• Ask what skills youth need to develop to maintain positive connections and to learn how to recognize healthy and unhealthy relationships.
• Respect the relationships that are important to youth. If you think these relationships are unhealthy, help youth understand why.

When we received support to build and maintain connections with supportive adults, either while in care or after we left, we saw the tangible benefits of having them in our lives. They are there for us and provide support when we need it.
Tool 6: Meaningfully Engaging Youth in Family Finding

GOAL: BETTER ENGAGE YOUTH IN THE FAMILY FINDING PROCESS

Youth should be actively engaged in the family finding process, including deciding who is contacted and how, and getting support to build and maintain these connections.

WHY IT’S IMPORTANT

Family finding is a powerful way to identify potential connections and can provide a supportive network for youth as they enter adulthood. Youth need to understand the process and what can happen once connections are identified. They need to have opportunities to talk through their feelings and options. When youth don’t have this information or are not engaged in the process, they may not be open to participating, resulting in missed opportunities for important connections.

OUR EXPERIENCES

- Some of us never participated in family finding during our time in care.
- We were unaware of family finding or that it was an option for us.
- We did not understand what family finding was; we thought it meant finding siblings who were adopted—even after we were told about the process and engaged in it.
- When we were engaged in the family finding process, we felt more emphasis was put on connecting to adults who could provide stable housing and less on people who could support us in other ways.
- We were not provided with emotional or logistical support to connect with relatives who were identified during the process.
- We did not receive emotional support to maintain these connections.

Many of us are aging out or have aged out of care without any supportive adults in our lives.

We were not supported to build or maintain connections with adults, especially not with people who could not provide placement or legal permanency.
BEST PRACTICES

• Engage in family finding the moment a child enters care and at least once a year to ensure youth have supportive, life-long connections with family and kin.

• Explain the purpose of family finding and how it fits with locating other resources, including kin.

• Explain the types of actions that can be taken once family or kin are identified.

• Work with youth to make a list of people who are important to them and revisit and add to this list frequently.

• Assist youth with contacting kin who they say are important to them.

• Take advantage of technology to locate family and kin.

• Help youth make good decisions about the relationships they develop with family and kin, and help them identify healthy relationships.

• Help youth develop a strong network of several supportive adults. Be supportive of youth who develop relationships with kin and family, even if they do not lead to placement or legal permanency.

The appendix includes scenarios and prompts that show what family finding can look like for a family finding social worker and a youth working together.

DID YOU KNOW

The Affordable Care Act made youth who were in foster care at age 18 or older eligible for Medicaid until age 26. Learn more at https://at.jlc.org/medicaid-FAQ.

The law requires the agency to work with the youth to develop a transition plan before they leave care at age 18 or older. This should at least include plans for housing, employment, education, health, and connections with supportive adults. The plan must be approved by the court before discharge.

When leaving care at age 18 or older, youth must be provided with the following documents: birth certificate, social security card, state identification card/driver’s license, health insurance information, medical record, and documentation of the time youth spent in foster care. 42 U.S.C.A. § 675(5)(I).
Tool 7: Creating a Comprehensive Transition Plan That Includes Connections with Services and Resources

ALL youth need supports to transition into adulthood successfully. One of the most crucial supports are caring adults who provide moral and other resource support. However, when youth do not have some of their most basic needs met, it is hard for them to maintain supportive relationships and to work on goals because their time is consumed surviving and making ends meet.

Making sure we have the items and services listed below before we leave care will help us be successful.

I. Mental Health Services

WHY IT’S IMPORTANT

Young people need to have access to comprehensive mental health support. Many of us have experienced trauma and need support to address it. Our experience with treatment was sometimes difficult, but many of us need help finding treatment and being supported during treatment. When we need treatment and do not receive it, we struggle to achieve many of our goals, including forming supportive connections. By helping us access treatment, you will be helping us get ready for permanency.

BEST PRACTICES

- Talk to youth about the importance and value of treatment.
- Connect them to comprehensive mental health treatment.
- Help them understand and manage their emotional and mental health.
- Help them explore non-traditional ways of addressing emotions, like getting involved in activities and hobbies or learning meditation.
- Teach youth about their prescriptions and how to manage and administer them.
- While developing a plan with youth, teach them how to schedule, find, and access mental health services.
• Teach youth about their right to services, including confidentiality and HIPPA
• Help youth find the therapist and treatment that are a good match for us, even if it’s not the right fit on the first try.
• Look past behavior and understand that sometimes youth act certain ways because of being hurt.

II. Health Insurance Coverage

WHY IT’S IMPORTANT

Having health insurance is important for youth to access important services for physical, mental, and emotional health. When youth are healthy, they are better positioned to talk about permanency and maintain supportive relationships.

BEST PRACTICES

• Help youth understand that they are eligible for Medicaid until age 26 if they were in foster care at age 18 and that they should be enrolled in Medicaid as a former foster youth before aging out of care.
• If youth left foster care before reaching age 18, help them get assistance to apply for Medicaid or other health insurance as part of their transition plan.
• Assist youth to secure and maintain any public benefits they may be eligible for, such as SSI and food stamps, prior to exiting care—those will help meet their basic needs and maintain their health.

III. A Comprehensive Housing Plan

WHY IT’S IMPORTANT

Too many young people become homeless when they age out of care, and this gets in the way of building a successful future. If youth do not have a safe place to live, it is hard for them to have stability. Having a detailed and realistic housing plan will prevent youth from becoming homeless. Having stable housing is an essential element of achieving permanency.

BEST PRACTICES

• Work with youth as early as possible to develop a transition plan with several housing options.
• Help youth understand and be realistic about all the costs involved in living on their own.
• Help youth develop skills and credentials so that they have the income they need
to maintain and afford stable housing when they leave care. If they are making minimum wage, it may be hard for them to afford rent in most cities.

- If youth are attending college, make sure they have a plan for housing during breaks or between semesters.
- Work with youth to understand different options for stable housing, like roommates or living with family.
- Teach and work with youth to review and understand leases and tenant’s rights.
- Refer youth to programs to help pay rent or make housing affordable.
- Help youth to understand the realities of affordable housing, including how public housing and other subsidy programs work.
- Assist youth in developing and learning daily living skills to manage their apartment or housing.
- Make sure youth are aware of extended foster care and aftercare and how it can help with meeting housing needs.
- Help youth to build a good transition plan and make sure that no youth leaves care and becomes homeless.

**DID YOU KNOW**

The Permanency Pact is a tool that can be used by youth in foster care and supportive adults to help establish permanency and a support network. It provides a way to formalize the relationship and identify expectations. Read more at [http://bit.ly/2E2F7jk](http://bit.ly/2E2F7jk).

Youth are already looking for family, so professionals need to get up to speed. Include youth in the process of connecting with family, kin, and caring adults so youth understand the processes and feel comfortable with the steps being taken.

Pennsylvania law requires that family finding be conducted annually until a youth leaves care. If APPLA is the goal, agency must document its efforts to utilize search technology to find biological family members for the child. 62 P.S. § 1302.1 & 42 Pa. C.S.A. 6351 (f.1)(5).
IV. Vital Records

WHY IT’S IMPORTANT

Having vital records (birth certificate, state ID and driver’s license, social security card, and proof of valid citizenship status) is essential to access education, physical and mental healthcare, employment, and more. Physically having these documents in care and as they transition out, better equips youth to secure employment and other essentials for a successful transition into adulthood.

BEST PRACTICES

- Make sure youth understand the child welfare agency’s obligation to provide vital documents before they leave care at age 18 or older; and help them raise this issue in planning meetings and in court.
- Teach youth the importance of these documents and how to request them if they are needed in the future.
- Make sure youth and their children have a safe place to store documents, including electronically.
Introduction

Family Finding is not always easy—sometimes youth need assistance identifying supportive adults and help maintaining connections with those adults. Tool 6: Meaningfully Engaging Youth in Family Finding, explains some of the challenges we faced during our own Family Finding processes and outlines best practices for engaging youth in that process.

Family Finding should be a collaborative process with youth and caseworkers (or the person designated to complete family finding); and youth should be involved at every step.

The following scenarios show how youth should be engaged in the process, and how the case worker and youth can work together to come up with the best possible outreach plan. These scenarios were also designed to help youth understand the process, to foster collaboration between the youth and case worker, and ensure the process is based on the youth’s interests.

Use the scenarios and prompts when you are working with a youth to reach out to a supportive adult or family member. The goal is to create the ideal situation for reaching out. Create a script, including as many steps and details as possible, and role play the best scenario. We suggest doing these at the beginning of the Family Finding process or at the specific stages when these scenarios are most relevant.
**Scenario 1: Adult Family Member, Frank**

Frank is the youth’s uncle on their mother’s side and lives in Ohio. How would you work with the youth to reach out to Frank?

**PHASE 1: REACHING OUT TO FRANK**

Ask the youth:

- Should we call Frank, or if provided, send him an email?
- Who should complete the first call? Would you like to and is that the best plan?
- Should I (the caseworker) to make the first call or point of contact?
- If I called, how would you like me to describe why I am calling?
- Do you want me (the caseworker) to leave Frank a voicemail?
- Should the first contact be a brief introduction?

---

**PHASE 2: FRANK IS INTERESTED IN AN INITIAL CONNECTION**

Ask the youth:

- If Frank is interested in connecting, how do you want to proceed with him?
- Should I (the caseworker) ask what he can provide?
- Should I ask Frank if you can live with him?
- Would you like me to set up in-person meetings or additional calls so you can get to know Frank better?
- Do you want to set up these meetings and calls yourself?
PHASE 3: MAINTAINING THE CONNECTION

What Frank can do to support the youth affects how you both will proceed with maintaining the connection with him.

Ask the youth:

- How do you want to proceed in maintaining a connection to Frank? Please be as detailed as possible. For example, do you want me to set up virtual or in-person meetings?
- How do you want to define what the relationship with Frank is?
- If you can live with Frank, how can they begin to build the relationship before the youth leaves to stay with them?
- If you cannot live with Frank, do you want to build a relationship with Frank so that he can be a support for you?
- What would you like me to do to help you build a relationship?

Alternative Scenario: If Frank is not interested in connecting, how should we proceed?
As the case worker, consider how the youth will feel and the best way to share this information.

Scenario 2: Older Sibling, Iman

Iman (identify sibling’s pronouns) is the youth’s older sibling. They live in Delaware county, and the youth has not seen them since they were separated as children. How would you work with the youth to reach out to Iman?

PHASE 1: REACHING OUT TO IMAN

Ask the youth:

- Would you like me (the caseworker) to call Iman, or if provided, send an email or message on Facebook?
- Should I leave a voicemail?
- Or, if you would like to call, how would you describe why you all are calling?
- Would this just be a brief introduction?
PHASE 2: IMAN IS INTERESTED IN AN INITIAL CONNECTION

Ask the youth:

- What is the best way for you to connect with Iman?
- How do you want to proceed with getting to knowing your sibling?
- Should you be the one to call the next time?
- Would you like me to set up meetings or additional calls to get to know Iman better again? Or, do you want to set up meetings and calls yourself?
- Should we ask what Iman can provide?
- Should one of us ask if youth can live with Iman?

PHASE 3: MAINTAINING THE CONNECTION

What Iman can do to support the youth affects how youth both will proceed in maintaining the connection.

Ask the youth:

- How do you want to proceed in maintaining a connection to Iman? Please be as detailed as possible. For example, do you want me to set up virtual and in-person meetings?
- How do you want to define what the relationship is?
- If the you can live with Iman, how do you want to build the relationship before you stay with Iman?
- If you cannot live with Iman, do you want to build a relationship so that they can be a support for you?
- What would you like me to do to help you build a relationship?
Alternative Scenario: If Iman is not interested in connecting further, how should we proceed next?

As the case worker consider how the youth will feel and the best way to share this information.
the road to adulthood
Aligning Child Welfare Practice With Adolescent Brain Development
ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation’s children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit the Foundation’s website at www.aecf.org.

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THE JIM CASEY YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES INITIATIVE

works to improve outcomes for all young people in the United States ages 14 to 26 who have spent at least one day in foster care after their 14th birthday — a population of nearly 1 million. Working with 17 sites across the country, the Jim Casey Initiative influences policy and practices to improve outcomes for teenagers and young adults who have experienced foster care as they transition to adulthood.
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Introduction

In 2011, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative launched Success Beyond 18, a campaign to raise the age of foster care to 21 nationwide while making the foster care system better and more supportive of adolescents and emerging adults. The campaign began with the publication of a summary of new research on the remarkable period of brain development that occurs during adolescence and young adulthood, and the opportunity of that developmental period to help young people who have been in foster care grow through new experiences and heal from past adversity. The new research showed that adolescents still have a lot of growing to do during late puberty and beyond, and that child welfare systems may be sending them out on their own too early and without necessary resources, relationships and opportunities to thrive.

Twenty-four states and the District of Columbia now have approved plans to provide foster care for young people beyond the age of 18, adding years of potentially vital support during this time of development. But in too many cases, adding years to eligibility for foster care is not leading to a permanent, rock-solid connection with a caring adult, a connection that is critical to lasting well-being. With or without the extension of foster care, child welfare systems have a tremendous but unrealized opportunity to improve their practices by embracing the power of adolescent brain development.
development to promote better outcomes in every facet of a young person’s life. Most importantly, child welfare service providers must focus on securing permanent families for more young people — even for older youth who are on the brink of adulthood — by understanding and responding to the many layers of each young person’s arc of development and emerging identity, from race and ethnicity to economic class to sexual orientation and gender identity. For those young people who leave foster care without legal permanence, child welfare professionals should at least facilitate the relational permanence of durable family-like connections to increase their well-being.

Adolescent development is shaped by opportunities to foster healthy relationships, take risks, make important decisions and accept new responsibilities. All too often, the critical demands to provide for the immediate, basic needs of young people in foster care fall on child welfare professionals, who then have to scramble to provide a safe place for the child to live, meet licensing requirements and make arrangements for medical services and school. Consumed with these tasks, agencies may lack the capacity to enable young people to have the normal growing-up experiences that will help them develop a stronger sense of self-efficacy, belonging, attachment and identity and that will address their strengths and needs as individuals. Yet it is this very approach that builds the adolescent brain and the ability of young people to navigate their world.

Fundamental to this report is the belief that achieving the best results requires treating each youth as a still-forming individual with purpose and potential and making sure all young people, regardless of the color of their skin or where they grow up, have an equitable chance to reach that potential. About 55 percent of children in the U.S. foster care system are children of color,3 and those children generally experience poorer outcomes than white children.4 To improve outcomes for children of color, child welfare professionals must understand how structural and institutional racism operates within our society and within the child welfare system and affects young people and their families. Practitioners also should be
aware of the role unconscious and implicit bias can play in their own decisions and actions and understand that experiences with racism and internalized oppression may negatively influence the way young people of color view themselves. Most of all, practitioners must be aware of how important access to opportunities is to helping a young person develop and grow. Only through awareness of these dynamics can professionals and caregivers understand young people in the fullness of their identity, experiences, values and customs.

Research reveals the critical need for effective practices in addressing the trauma, loss and grief that older youth and young adults who have been in foster care are likely to have experienced through no fault of their own. Studies also show the need to address the additional harm of racism, disparate treatment and experiences that children of color face in the foster care system, and that may serve as barriers to their ability to heal from trauma.

This paper offers recommendations for child welfare professionals, caregivers and systems to use this research to work effectively with youth in or emerging from foster care in the four focus areas of the Jim Casey Initiative’s work — permanence, educational attainment and economic security, stable housing and supports for young parents. While most of our recommendations are for individuals working with young people — child welfare caseworkers and service providers, judges, lawyers, caregivers, teachers, coaches and mentors — systems and organizations are key to supporting these practices on a broad scale. Success in these focus areas requires that child welfare and related systems make five key changes. We hope they will use this paper as a roadmap to do so:

1. Train and equip practitioners to understand the role of trauma and racism, and employ effective practices to help young people understand their experiences and develop effective strategies for healing and growth.

2. Prioritize legal permanency for all youth. This requires creating an intentional, deliberate culture of recognizing and advocating against old attitudes and assumptions, as well as stereotypes that have often negatively affected reunification, the type of home where a child is placed, adoption and length of stay for older youth and youth of color. Use disaggregated data and racial impact analysis tools to hold the system accountable and develop strategies for improvement.

3. Understand that foster care carries a level of stigma, affecting successful educational outcomes and opportunities for employment. Promote a range of career pathways, from student leadership opportunities to community service, job shadowing and internships, and build connections with guidance counselors and coaches to create on-ramps to college and a career.

4. Build connections with local housing providers to ensure adequate and safe housing for youth while encouraging youth choice and voice. Understand that race and ethnicity stubbornly remain predictors of where one can live and be accepted by the local community.

5. Understand that young parents and their children are both in important stages of their brain development. Support practitioners to help young
parents continue to make progress toward their educational and employment goals, build self-sufficiency, maintain healthy relationships and support them as the primary nurturers of their children.

Terms used throughout the paper are defined in a glossary at the end of the text, followed by a resources section to help those who work with young people learn more.

The Latest Research on Adolescent Brain Development

Over the past two decades, significant scientific progress has been made in understanding the changes to the brain that occur during adolescence. In contrast to what was believed, we have learned that the brain continues developing well beyond age 6. Indeed, we experience another major developmental window during adolescence that rivals the growth spurt of early childhood. We know a young person’s brain continues to develop through the mid-20s, and we are gaining insights into how the changes affect risk taking, emotional regulation and the ability to connect socially and emotionally with others. We also know that with knowledge of how the adolescent brain matures, adults can do more to not only provide a safer environment for taking risks that meet adolescents’ developmental needs but also reduce dangerous behaviors that jeopardize healthy development.

Research shows that humans have a unique ability to mold their own brains through thinking, planning, learning and acting, known as “neuroplasticity,” which is especially malleable during adolescence. This growth in adolescence depends on experiences — trying new things, making decisions, learning skills and forming memories — that build connectivity in the brain and sense of self in the person. This ability also means the adolescent brain can be rewired to heal from earlier trauma, a critical point of opportunity for young people involved in the child welfare system. As humans develop from infancy through end of life, they go through approximately seven stages of growth. Emerging adulthood describes the gradual transition young people make to adulthood from about age 18 through 25. This process is marked by gradual independence from family in the areas of residence, employment, education, finances, romance and parenting.

Despite what we know about emerging adulthood and gradual independence, however, young people in foster care often are forced into a rapid transition. While they are in the foster care system, decisions are typically made for them, often without their input. And when they age out of the foster care system at 18 or 21, young people are often suddenly and completely on their own, without having had the opportunity to build skills and experience self-reliance within a safe, nurturing environment.

HOW THE BRAIN DEVELOPS

The brain in adolescence might be compared to a sprinter who is gradually learning to become a marathon runner. During adolescence, different regions of the brain begin to integrate and the prefrontal cortex starts an accelerated pace of development. Adolescent brains are composed
The prefrontal cortex houses our abilities to

- Balance our emotions
- Think critically and rationalize for steady decision making
- Plan for the future
- Organize our thoughts
- Regulate impulses
- Be flexible and adapt to changing situations
- Reflect and be introspective
- Exercise empathy

most of gray matter, which contains neurons or cells that control thought, perception, motion and bodily functions. Compared with the adult brain, the adolescent brain has much less white matter, which is the connective wiring that helps information flow efficiently from one part of the brain to the other. This means that adolescents still rely heavily on the emotional center of the brain for decision making, reacting to rapid-firing pleasurable emotions and rewarding sensations — the sprint. But as they move through this period of development, young people gradually begin to shift more to the prefrontal cortex when making decisions and navigating their worlds, taking context, experience and future implications into consideration in a way that a marathon runner might when pacing and fueling herself for the long run. Perhaps most importantly, as the brain develops, different regions of the brain connect and communicate with each other in a process known as neural integration. One of the most highly integrated parts of the brain is the prefrontal cortex.

This shift in development happens over time, and looks different for different individuals. The right opportunities can make the most of a young person’s sprinting brain — rewarding accomplishments, providing new outlets for affirmation from peers — while also building the marathon skills of going a little further each time, training and learning from mistakes. Strong connections, healthy habits and positive relationships are like having the right shoes and optimal weather for the race; conversely, chronic stress, trauma, the experience of institutional and internalized racial inferiority and unhealthy self-medication during adolescence serve as the hills, potholes and headwinds in the way of reaching the finish line.

The evolution of the sprinting brain into the marathon-running brain is taking place over a longer period of years than
ever before. Due to a number of suspected factors, including increased obesity, endocrine disrupters (such as pesticides) and family stress, it has been well documented that the onset of puberty starts earlier for adolescents — ages 9 to 12 — than it did in the past. While adolescents may appear to physically mature faster than before, their brain development is spread out over a longer span of time. As a result, adults may assume that young people are more mature than they actually are — a phenomenon that research has shown is particularly true for young people of color.

Three major aspects of the brain are especially active and undergoing changes during adolescence:

- **Regulation**

  Neurological research shows us that young people can evaluate risks as well as adults; however, the intensity of dopamine — the pleasure chemical — flooding the brains can easily outweigh consideration of potential negative outcomes. Positive experiences during adolescence can “fortify healthy neural connections, develop executive function and stimulate learning and healing.” Positive experiences that contradict the negative expectations of a child who has experienced trauma are critical to helping the brain readjust itself.
- 

**Relationships**

During adolescence, young people experience heightened arousal in the brain regions that are sensitive to social acceptance and rejection. Adolescents are particularly attuned to emotional cues such as facial expressions. This means that adolescents actually learn more when they are with their friends and peers. Such influence can be used to help young people grow together in a nurturing, positive environment.

- 

**Rewards**

Adolescents are more receptive to reward-based learning than punishment-based learning. Rewards extend beyond gold stars and the promise of a new toy. Things such as peer approval, acceptance and praise trigger a flood of dopamine into the brain, reinforcing actions and behavior.

Because the brain is rapidly growing during this time, adolescent and young adult brains are particularly sensitive and experience a “reminiscence bump” in which memories are more deeply imprinted on their brains, making our teenage years the most memorable. Thanks to the neuroplasticity of the brain and the reminiscence bump, learning things as well as developing habits and thought patterns throughout adolescence can deeply shape our identity and stick with us far into adulthood. It also means that the use of substances such as alcohol and other drugs during adolescence can have an even more negative effect more quickly on young people than on adults. Alcohol and drugs disrupt the healthy development of the brain’s ability to delay gratification and recognize and avoid unhealthy behavior, and can negatively affect the way the reward system functions.

The “stickiness” of memories and the key developmental changes happening during adolescence mean that the day-to-day relationship between child welfare professionals and young people matters a great deal. Reactions and actions from adults, both verbal and nonverbal, can have a magnified effect on the growing brain. Professionals and caregivers working with youth should keep the following in mind:

- Be consistent in your relationships with young people, emphasizing compassion, belief in their future and your high expectations of them.
- Be clear and honest about expectations and consequences if expectations are not met.
- Help young people understand and deal with the constant loss of caseworkers due to turnover and the loss of relationships with peers because of moves.
- Celebrate achievements and milestones — big and small.
- Understand and talk with young people about what is going on in the brain and help them make sense of it.
- Have empathetic conversations with young people about real and/or perceived experiences with racism or discrimination.
- Encourage and acknowledge the novelty experiences young people crave: visiting new places, being encouraged and allowed to go places on their own, learning to drive and falling in love for the first time.
Provide brain-building experiences, which are “stretch” activities that must be slightly beyond reach, yet not unattainable. Reexamine preconceived notions about what a particular young person is ready to do. Can you help her stretch by encouraging a first job that explores her passions? Offer a leadership role in a group? Arrange a public speaking opportunity?

The brain is a social organ, meaning that healthy brain development and overall well-being are dependent upon the quality and consistency of relationships. Adolescents and young adults are hardwired to be brave, try new things, take chances and push boundaries. Taking risks, experiencing success as well as failure and understanding consequences are essential to learning, building resilience and crafting identity. Youth in foster care, group placements or transitional housing need more opportunities to exercise risk and autonomy that are a normal part of growing up, such as staying overnight with a friend, applying to jobs and having romantic relationships without fear of repercussions that jeopardize their basic stability and attachments. The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 recognizes this by making clear that the well-being of young people in foster care must be grounded in a normalcy standard — providing them the same family support, opportunities, experiences and high expectations as all other young people in their communities.

Sex Differences in Brain Development

Researchers at the National Institute of Mental Health found significant differences between females and males in the sequence and pace of development of the various brain regions during adolescence. Among the key findings is that females reach the halfway point in brain development just before 11 years of age, while males do so just before age 15. The study also concluded that a young woman reaches full maturity in terms of brain development between the ages of 21 and 22, while young men typically do not reach this point until nearly 30. There is little research on the intersection of gender identity/gender nonconformity and adolescent brain development, which likely has implications for practitioners working with transgender youth and for transgender youth themselves.

Promoting Healthy Brain Development for Youth in Foster Care

Promoting healthy adolescent brain development for young people in foster care requires special understanding of how the experience of foster care affects a child’s development and how factors such as racism and discrimination compound trauma and chronic stress while limiting access to the opportunities and rewarding...
experiences adolescents need to thrive. Caregivers and professionals can help by taking time to understand how each young person in foster care experiences the world, and help them build resilience by recognizing and acknowledging their history while expanding their skills and their horizons.

THE ROLE OF TRAUMA, AMBIGUOUS LOSS AND HOT COGNITION

At the same time young people in foster care are poised to take on new challenges, many of them are dealing with the continuing effects of adverse childhood experiences, trauma and “ambiguous loss.” For example, childhood maltreatment can cause irritability in the brain’s limbic system, which tends to produce chronic low-level unhappiness, aggression and violence toward oneself or others.20 Separation from one’s parents or guardians, either literally through the separation and transition into foster care or figuratively when the caregiver remains in the home but is emotionally disconnected from the child, causes a young person to experience an ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss is a form of loss in which there is no verification of death, no certainty that the person will come back or no assurance that the person will return to the way they used to be. When ambiguous loss is unresolved, longing persists and can inhibit a young person’s emotional availability for new experiences and positive relationships.21 Professionals should take these factors into account and help young people process losses, trauma and stress even as they pursue new developmental opportunities.

The experience of childhood adversity and trauma must be managed throughout life. While young people may have received intervention and support to cope with an issue at one point, the same issue may resurface in a different form as they hit a new stage of development. For example, trauma often resurfaces at times of transition.

In addition to the stress they may carry from past experiences, young people in foster care often face stressful new situations that tax their developing brains. By age 16, adolescents typically have the ability to make mature decisions in situations where they are unhurried, can consult with others and where their emotions are less aroused. This is referred to as “cold cognition,” which results in steadier decision making. However, young people may still struggle in “hot cognition” situations, when they feel time pressured, are emotionally aroused in some way or are subject to peer pressure.

For young people in or emerging from foster care, hot cognition moments abound, and the stakes are high. For example:

- I am only given a couple hours of notice to pack my belongings and move to another foster home.
- I am in trouble with my friends and am afraid I will get kicked out of my home if I tell anyone or ask for help.
- I want to explain myself, but people are blaming me without listening to what I have to say — maybe it would be easier to take off and not tell anyone.
- I notice the difference in how I am being treated in my group home based on my

“When you have lost everything, you believe you won’t amount to anything.”
— Jim Casey Initiative Young Fellow
race or gender identity, but no one ever believes me so I will keep it to myself.

SEEING BRAIN DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF RACIAL AND ETHNIC EQUITY

During adolescence, brain development depends on experiences and opportunities to build relationships, exercise autonomy, take risks and grow in a supportive environment. For youth of color, normal risk taking may be inhibited by fear of repercussions and more often criminalized. Healthy brain development is fundamental to healing, successfully transitioning into adulthood and overall well-being. Yet we are also faced with the reality that youth of color are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system through no fault of their own and experience disparately negative outcomes when compared with their white peers in foster care.

Adults cannot effectively nurture the development of young people in foster care without considering and understanding the significance of race and ethnicity in a young person’s formative experiences. Just as positive and affirming experiences strengthen brain development, the experience of racial discrimination interferes with an adolescent’s development and is a strong predictor of preadolescent and adolescent depressive symptoms. Once in foster care, young people of color frequently report having difficulty developing their racial and ethnic identity. Children of color receive fewer familial visits, fewer contacts with caseworkers, fewer written case plans and fewer developmental or psychological assessments compared with white children. Specifically, African-American youth are more likely than white or Latino children to be placed in group institutions rather than foster families. A recent study found that about 57 percent of youth who identify as LGBTQ in child welfare systems are youth of color. Such youth are more likely than their peers to experience instability in their home environments and have poor mental and behavioral health outcomes.

Racial bias in decision making within various public systems produces more negative decisions against youth of color in comparison with their white peers. The more discretionary the decision-making structure, or the more decisions are rushed, the more likely youth of color suffer from unfair assessments and dispositions.

Research also shows that a supportive family environment may protect youth of color against the negative effects of racism. This means it is critically important for child welfare professionals to seek permanence for youth of color, to connect them to networks and to positively nurture their development with rewards rather than punishment. One study found that a strong sense of self, racial identity and racial socialization can serve as protective factors for African-American adolescents. Professionals and parents should be deliberate about helping youth develop these strengths within the context of a family. Child welfare systems should be intentional and deliberate about engaging contracted providers, foster families, judges and other partners in understanding the impact of institutional and structural racism. In other words, our diligence must reflect what we would desire for our own children.
Creating a nurturing environment requires thinking broadly about how to provide brain-building opportunities for young people who may face racism when taking on their new roles. For example, a young Native American man in foster care in New Mexico described his attempt to take on a leadership role by going door to door in his community to raise awareness about an issue he was passionate about, only to be interrogated by police for “looking suspicious.” This example illustrates just one of the challenges young people of color face when trying to engage in activities that would otherwise promote healthy development and leadership skills.

**DURING ADOLESCENCE**, brain development depends on experiences and opportunities to build relationships, exercise autonomy, take risks and grow in a supportive environment. For youth of color, normal risk taking may be inhibited by fear of repercussions and more often criminalized.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR KEY DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS**

The left side of Table 1 on page 16 identifies the distinct developmental tasks that adolescents must complete to move through the period of emerging adulthood to become healthy, connected and productive adults. The two right columns illustrate how the experience of foster care and various cultural considerations may affect a young person taking on those tasks.
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<th>ADOLESCENTS ARE EXPECTED TO…</th>
<th>FOR YOUTH WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED FOSTER CARE: WHAT IF…</th>
<th>CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS: WHAT IF…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adjust to a new physical sense of self</td>
<td>I have grown to feel disconnected from my physical sense of self as a coping mechanism?</td>
<td>I don’t have a sense of who I am and almost every message I receive is negative?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjust to new intellectual abilities</td>
<td>My need to focus on survival has overwhelmed or distracted my cognitive capacities?</td>
<td>I can’t think clearly or take intellectual risks because of my sense of not being good enough?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet increased cognitive demands at school</td>
<td>Multiple moves and school changes prevent me from applying myself in school?</td>
<td>I am disciplined more than my peers, which means I am often out of the classroom and will never catch up; so why try?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expand verbal skills</td>
<td>My stress responses have limited my ability and confidence to verbalize how I feel and what’s important to me?</td>
<td>I don’t feel like anyone wants to hear or believes what I have to say, so I just remain silent?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop a personal sense of identity</td>
<td>My experiences with adults have not validated that I matter? What if most people have just identified me as “a troubled child”?</td>
<td>Every message I get from society tells me that as a youth of color or identifying as LGBTQ I am inferior?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consolidate the capacity to control impulses, calibrate risks and rewards, regulate emotions, project the self into the future and think strategically</td>
<td>I have not had the foundation or environment to develop and consolidate these skills?</td>
<td>My experiences have limited my capacity to look into the future? What if I see too many bad things that I don’t understand happening to people who look like me? What if I am unsure that I will even have a future?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish adult career goals</td>
<td>I’ve been focused on survival — here and now, day to day — and not my future?</td>
<td>I have been in foster care for many years with no significant person in my life? What if all I can focus on is who will be there for me when I leave foster care?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain emotional and psychological independence from parents</td>
<td>My bond and relationships with my parents were disrupted before I gained independence and interdependence?</td>
<td>I did not have the opportunity to bond with my parents and my experiences have primarily been in group placements?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop stable and productive peer relationships</td>
<td>The stability of my relationships with my peers has suffered because I am never in a place long enough to plant friendship roots?</td>
<td>I have not been placed with people who share my culture and values and no one has provided the opportunity for me to build these relationships?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn to manage sexuality and a sexual identity</td>
<td>I don’t have someone safe to talk to about safe sex? What if I have been displaced from several homes based on my sexual or gender identity?</td>
<td>No adult in my life shares my cultural background and context for such an intimate conversation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopt a personal value system</td>
<td>I have not had a consistent and loving relationship to help define a healthy, strong personal value system?</td>
<td>I have always had to agree with someone else’s value system, even though mine might be different?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop increased impulse control and behavioral maturity</td>
<td>I haven’t had the care, guidance and nurturing to teach and reinforce healthy control over my impulses so that my judgment and behavior mature with my development?</td>
<td>I have been disciplined and restrained for behaviors that my peers were not?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
OVERALL STRATEGIES FOR PROFESSIONALS, CAREGIVERS AND SYSTEMS

Equipping young people with strategies to make sense of things that have happened to them — which include experiences with racism and/or discrimination — helps maximize their developmental gains. Insight into their experiences and internal development serves as a validating and empowering protective factor for them to heal from trauma, adversity, internalized racial oppression and difficult emotions.

Ways professionals and caregivers can help young people respond to trauma:

• Talk about and honor past relationships while recognizing those who will continue to provide support. Understand the role of historical and intergenerational trauma due to racism.

• Introduce activities and practices that are particularly useful in helping young people begin to heal from their experiences of trauma and loss through such practices as mindfulness meditation, restorative yoga and self-guided sports like swimming and running.

• Some youth may feel that prayer or other spiritual activities are useful for healing. Encourage young people to discuss their faith and cultural traditions and provide opportunities for them to continue to participate in ways and with people meaningful to them.35

• Listen to and respect young people’s truths that may not align with your beliefs or experiences.

• Encourage open communication and validate the need to grieve and receive support. Have conversations with young people about their interests and hopes for the future. Making thoughtful decisions and plans requires young people to have hope and see themselves as worthy of having the future they deserve. Create a liberated space for conversations on race, racism and discrimination.

• Understand that loss may keep a young person from warming up to a practitioner or a new family, no matter how caring the family is. Help young people reduce stress and take care of themselves by making sure they get enough sleep, eat a healthy diet and limit the use of stimulants such as caffeine.

• Plan as far in advance as possible with young people about upcoming changes and transitions, including changes in caseworkers. Be open about case planning. Let them know what to expect and what resources they will have.

• Actively engage young people in processing and talking through moments of hot cognition. Provide space to reflect with the young person about what was triggering, maddening or confusing. Create a plan for handling similar situations in the future.

• When dealing with a young person during a moment of hot cognition, monitor your own reactions. Reflect on the ways in which you might be heightening emotional arousal or helping to balance it so the young person can have room and time to respond productively.

• Recognize that trauma can prompt substance abuse as a form of self-medication and work to equip youth with alternative coping mechanisms. Reduce the chances that young people will turn
to harmful substances by providing and modeling a clear, safe, caring value system that has relevance to a young person’s identity and background including, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, gender identity and sexual orientation. Recognize the signs that a young person is smoking or using drugs or alcohol, and seek help from expert community organizations if needed. Share with young people in foster care the added risks of substance abuse for youth who have experienced adversity and trauma.

- Provide opportunities for young people to attend cultural events that allow them to explore and affirm their racial and ethnic identity, ideally with peers. When considering new roles or experiences for a young person to take on, ensure you are not making assumptions about their racial or ethnic background that would limit their opportunities.

Systems can support these practices by doing the following:

- Work to recruit a diverse pool of foster parents and mentors to expose young people to many different positive role models.
- Use data disaggregated by race and ethnicity at each decision point to hold systems accountable for equity in outcomes for all youth.
- Develop systems improvement strategies by analyzing disaggregated data using a racial impact assessment tool.
- Use a racial impact assessment tool on current and new policies and practices.
- Engage all levels of staff and partners in bold and courageous conversations that examine attitudes, assumptions and stereotypes about the “why” of the data.
- Facilitate training that focuses on creating a common definition and understanding of institutional and structural racism so that a common language emerges to have honest discussions that address racism as being at the very core of racial inequities.

Understanding the developmental stage of emerging adulthood has important implications for practice and programming. Because of the increased neuroplasticity of the brain during adolescence, neural connections can be rewired when the individual has the benefit of corrective experiences and relationships.

Promoting Development in Four Focus Areas: Recommendations for Child Welfare Professionals and Caregivers

The following recommendations are organized according to the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative’s four focus areas: permanence, educational attainment and economic security, housing stability and supports for young parents. These four areas are interconnected and critical components to ensuring that all young people transitioning from foster care have the relationships, resources and opportunities to ensure well-being and success. Research on adolescent brain development has strong implications for how professionals and caregivers approach young people.

“What we experience really puts our adult life in our hands. What experiences do we want to rewire our brains?”

— Jim Casey Initiative Young Fellow
FOCUS AREA 1

> promoting permanence

Legal permanence should be a primary goal for child welfare professionals. Because foster care is intended to be a temporary haven, practitioners should never give up on finding a young person a permanent family or reuniting them with their family of origin, no matter how old the young person or how available other support services might be. Many adolescents in the child welfare system are placed in group care facilities, which often limits opportunities for healthy adult relationships and family-like connections. We know that the quality and consistency of relationships influence well-being and profoundly shape adolescent brain development. Data indicate that young people transitioning from foster care without strong ties to supportive networks are more likely to experience poor outcomes in the areas of employment, early pregnancy, education, criminal justice and homelessness than most of their peers in the general population. Unfortunately, as a young person’s age increases, the likelihood of achieving legal permanence decreases. The way we engage both young people and caregivers holds the potential of reversing this trend.

Decisions that result in young people living in group placements can make it harder for them to achieve permanence. About half of older youth who have experienced foster care have spent time in such facilities. In fact, African-American youth are more likely to have been placed in group facilities than white or Latino youth, putting them at a marked disadvantage for exposure to opportunities that lead to successful permanence. Furthermore, African-American youth are emancipated from foster care without permanence at a rate 1.23 times higher compared with white youth, and Latino youth are emancipated at a rate 1.15 times higher than their white peers. Because adolescent brain research tells us that healthy development is “experience dependent,” the disparate treatment of African-American and Latino youth is ultimately a matter of disparate opportunities to grow, develop and successfully transition into adulthood. The likelihood that African-American children will experience kinship care — living with relatives or friends when their parents cannot take care of them — is much higher than that of the overall population. This provides a great opportunity to equip kin caregivers with knowledge and tools about how to maximize adolescent brain development in the context of a young person’s racial and ethnic identity and for child welfare systems to commit to greater support of kin based on the return on investment for young people in foster care.

Many adolescents often say they do not want legal permanence because they do not want to experience rejection, disappointment or legal separation from their families of origin. Neurobiologically speaking, their brains are literally urging them to be independent. Yet when child welfare professionals set legal permanence efforts on the back burner and give up on the quest to find a family, young people may experience this inaction as further evidence that they are not worthy of being part of a permanent family. As they mature, many young people come to understand the importance of permanence and ultimately want support to gain it. Effective conversations that
happen early and often can help practitioners and caregivers guide young people to becoming open to permanence and building social capital.43

Integrating cultural, racial and ethnic background is important to a young person’s sense of belonging to and bonding with another family. It is important to be aware and understanding when young people want to be part of a family that looks and feels as natural as possible.44

Fortunately, when families and child welfare staff are open to acknowledging, talking about and planning based on feedback from the young person affected, family bonding can happen. Professionals and foster parents can help by connecting young people with communities that reinforce their sense of self. Some developmentally responsive approaches to increase permanency include:

• Develop in-home safety and support plans for both the short and long term to prevent or avoid the need for out-of-home separations and disruptions.

• Understand that adolescents take risks as a necessary part of normal development. This does not mean they are being deviant or noncompliant, or that they cannot be successful in a family.

• Inform birth parents, foster parents, guardians, caregivers and mentors that every relationship and interaction has a profound influence on the development of each young person.

• Adolescents are in the midst of further developing and navigating their identities. Explore their thoughts, concerns and questions about permanence. Ask what permanence means to them in the context of racial, ethnic and gender identity and sexual orientation. Ask questions that help youth imagine the future and think about the people they will want to have in their lives.

• Support adolescents in developing their skills to ask critical questions, plan ahead and think about the future. Persist in efforts at family finding. Actively maintain family connections for youth and avoid sanctions that would reduce their visits with family.

• It is never too late to establish permanence. Keep revisiting possibilities for legal permanence. When legal permanence cannot be achieved, concentrate with the same amount of urgency on creating family-like connections that are lifelong and unconditional for enhancing the development and well-being of young people. Talk about and keep options for adult adoptions open.

• Make sure that racial and ethnic bias does not limit opportunities for family connections through extended family and relatives.

FOCUS AREA 2

> advancing educational success and economic security

Being connected to school or work is important for fostering healthy intellectual development, building relationships and contributing to greater economic stability. About 5.5 million youth in the United States are neither in school nor working, and young people who have experienced foster care are less likely than their peers to find and keep stable jobs and are more likely to earn less, even into adulthood.45 A 2015 report found
that 22 percent of African Americans, 28 percent of Native Americans and 16 percent of Latinos ages 16–24 were disconnected from school and work, compared with 8 percent of Asian Americans and 11 percent of whites. Taking on the responsibilities of school and work strengthens the brain's regulatory system, reinforcing decision-making and organizational skills. Keeping young people connected starts by maintaining school stability and connections to their communities. If separation from a young person's community cannot be avoided, it is important to ensure opportunities to physically maintain those relationships and ties — beyond connections via social media. Intentionally exposing youth to family, social and community functions that allow them to meet and interact with peers who are supportive, kind and productive can be especially helpful for youth with unhealthy peer relationships.

Helping young people think about the future means first attending to their present basic needs — needs that may not always have been met for youth in foster care. Personality, talent and skills inventories can help young people tap into areas of the career and educational world for which they have a passion or may be uniquely suited. Encourage young people to get a first job and participate in career and educational programs with peers that provide incentives for milestones achieved, activating the adolescent brain's reward-seeking characteristics.

Practitioners and caregivers should seek opportunities in both school and work to provide young people chances to take on new challenges:

• Advocate for and prioritize school and community continuity even if home environments need to change.

• Provide opportunities for young people to learn new skills that will provide positive reinforcement for the brain's active reward system. Activities such as running for student government, trying a sport or musical instrument or volunteering in the community are just a few of the activities that adolescents can try that will fulfill their developmental need to take risks.

What’s Working: Planning Futures With Youth Networks in Hawaii

The E Makua Ana Youth Circle Program is a state-funded transition-planning program provided by EPIC Ohana, the lead organization of the Jim Casey Initiative work in Hawaii. Youth Circles help current and former foster youth transitioning out of the foster care system by bringing together a youth’s family, providers and other supporters to highlight the youth’s strengths, share resources and brainstorm options through a collaborative, culturally sensitive process. The youth chooses who will be invited and what kind of food will be served at the circle and chooses his own plan.
What’s Working: Driving and Youth in Foster Care

Learning to drive is a brain-building novelty experience and important developmental task for establishing independence that adolescents should acquire during their late teens. The Keys to Independence Program, which started in Florida, helps provide youth in foster care access to driver’s education and the opportunity to earn a driver’s license. The program removes barriers to this rite of passage by reimbursing youth and caregivers for certain costs of learning to drive, including fees for driver’s education, driver’s licenses and insurance. Learn more at www.k2i.us.

- Recognize that in addition to losing family or family-like connections, losing one’s friends, teams and other connections only compounds the young person’s loss and can ultimately feel like undeserved punishment.
- Help a young person get a first job mowing lawns, walking dogs or babysitting, or, for those who have a job, take up new responsibilities. Being trusted with these duties and rewarded with paychecks and praise builds important connections and reinforcement in the adolescent brain.
- Provide practice and guidance on how to communicate effectively with a supervisor, boss or teacher.
- Work with coaches, guidance counselors and others to help young people develop and navigate their plans for college and a career.
- Access a range of career pathways, from student leadership opportunities to community service, job shadowing and internships, to create on-ramps to employment.

FOCUS AREA 3

> connecting youth to safe and stable housing

Finding safe and stable housing can be difficult for youth transitioning from foster care, particularly if they are transitioning to being on their own. Between 11 percent and 37 percent of youth emancipating from foster care experience homelessness after they transition, and an additional 25 percent to 50 percent are unstably housed after transition, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.47 In particular, Native American youth who were in foster care at 17 are more likely to report being homeless by 19 than transitioning youth of other backgrounds.48

Many young people are emancipated from foster care to independent living. Adolescents and emerging adults are naturally experiencing a push toward independence; however, prioritizing interdependence and connecting young people with a consistent and supportive network is vital to healthy development. Young people who are ready to live on their own should have a range of housing...
options that will enable them to gradually gain independence in supportive settings designed to meet their needs and that take advantage of a young person’s network of family, mentors and positive peers. Adults can help young people in their care or on their caseloads by helping them evaluate options and counter the peer pressure that can create hot cognition moments and lead a young person to live somewhere that may be hazardous or tenuous. Landlords and housing systems should create materials for young people that clearly explain rules and responsibilities, and offer accessible support systems and multiple platforms of communication so that young people can get information and understand their rights. Caregivers and practitioners should help young people access this information.

Here are some ways child welfare professionals can help youth navigate housing while promoting healthy adolescent brain development:

- Provide guidance on what to check and look for when inspecting a potential home.
- Have conversations with young people to promote critical thinking and decision-making skills regarding housing options — for example: How will I know if this is a safe housing option? How would I access transportation? How do I decide whether to have a roommate? How do I create rules and norms in my living space for myself and others?
- Talk with young people about their rights and responsibilities as a tenant

What’s Working: Young People Plan for College and Jobs in Maine

As part of the Jim Casey Initiative and Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP), a five-year, $24 million initiative to increase employment and educational opportunities for young people, the Maine Youth Transition Collaborative provides intensive support to young people as they transition from high school to college and other postsecondary training. An evidence-based teaming model encourages young people in foster care to lead development of a specific plan for their higher education in concert with their hopes, dreams, goals and strengths, exercising the self-regulation, decision-making and planning skills that are developing rapidly during adolescence and young adulthood. As each young person becomes more independent, the program gradually removes supports while keeping in contact, much as a parent would do for a young adult living on his own for the first time. In addition to campus-based supports for those in college, young people in foster care are offered help in applying for jobs and securing job-shadowing opportunities and are able to participate in a training program with a workforce service provider.
Guiding Youth to Stable Housing: Cleveland’s 100-Day Challenge

In September 2016, the Jim Casey Initiative site in Cleveland, A Place 4 Me, launched a challenge to house 100 homeless youth ages 18–24 in 100 days and strengthen systems to prevent homelessness for youth aging out of foster care. Among several strategies, the collaborative established 12 adult “system navigators” to guide youth through resources for housing, rather than leaving them to traverse a complex system on their own. The young people were able to make selections — each had three apartments to consider. With their navigators, they discussed how they would sustain the apartment once the subsidy ended. Navigators also connected clients to related resources, such as employment, education and legal help. The effort exceeded its goal, housing 105 young adults — 38 of whom had experienced foster care.

if they are renting housing. If young people are experiencing housing discrimination, help them connect with advocates who can support them in asserting their rights.

• Connect with landlords who are willing to rent to young people and have youth-friendly policies, such as individual leases for roommates. Providers should consider agencies who use master leases with scattered sites throughout the community.

• Promote the development of planning skills with young people by talking about how to pay bills, sort and organize mail and keep track of important documents. Supporting these abilities encourages the development of executive function skills.

• Make sure young people who are attending a residential college are connected with on-site staff to navigate housing options when school is not in session.

• Build financial capability by helping youth navigate budgeting and significant purchases such as a car or computer for school.

FOCUS AREA 4

> supporting young parents and family planning

Adolescence is a time of hormonal changes, exploration and identity development. One of the key developmental tasks for young people during adolescence is learning to manage their sexuality and sexual identity. The adolescent brain’s great sensitivity to relationships and rewards makes navigating the strong feelings that accompany romantic relationships particularly intense. These developmental processes continue to occur even in the presence of challenges such as untimely or unintended pregnancies. Young people in foster care are statistically more likely to become young parents. Without supports
and nurturing, the children of these young parents are apt to enter foster care, continuing a multigenerational cycle in foster care.49

For all young people and for young parents, child welfare professionals can support thoughtful family planning in the following ways:

• Provide support, education and resources to equip young people to navigate contraceptive choices, sexuality and sexual relationships. Encourage supportive, candid, judgment-free conversations about safe sex and sexual identity that can strengthen the brain’s decision-making pathways.

• Provide information and access to reproductive health resources and services. Encourage young people to ask questions about safe sex, sexual orientation and gender identity. Be prepared to address and ask questions such as: What is protected sex? Where is the closest clinic? How can you get there? What identification do you need? Who needs to know? What rumors are young people hearing about sex and STDs?

What’s Working: Supporting Young Parents and Children in Georgia

The Multi-Agency Alliance for Children (MAAC), the lead Georgia agency for the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, works to make sure young parents in foster care are equipped to support their children’s development without losing sight of their own hopes and dreams. MAAC’s Teen Parent Connection (TPC) program supports teen parents in care with professional life coaches. Coaches meet one-on-one with teens and their children and use an evidence-based curriculum designed to help teen parents practice and learn critical parenting and life skills. Through group classes and special events, these young parents interact with peers who also have had children while in foster care, enjoying social activities while learning about early childhood development and their own development, receiving financial coaching, understanding their relationship to their children and their rights as parents and planning for policy advocacy. The peer interaction — which the adolescent brain thrives on — gives young parents hope, said Victoria Salzman, Georgia Youth Opportunities Initiative program director. “For a young mom to see another young mother in care who is three or four years older and has been able to go back to school, to get a car…that’s not something often modeled for them,” she said. Activities range from whole-family outings to places like a children’s museum and Mommy and Me Camp to young-adult-only outings with child care provided. Said Salzman: “They can be as much of a mom as they want to be, or as much of a teenager as they want to be.”
• Emphasize the importance of healthy, caring relationships. Provide training and information to foster parents. Encourage them to get to know friends of children in their care and provide age-appropriate supervision.50

• Family planning requires thinking about the future. Start conversations that help a young parent plan for college, career goals and managing multiple interests.

• Accept and respect young people’s sexual orientation, gender identity and expression. Ask their preferred pronouns, and use those pronouns when referring to the young person.

• Ask young people what they need.

• Provide opportunities for peer support.

It is crucial to understand that young people who are parenting and their children are experiencing rapid periods of brain development at the same time. Here are some ways to support young parents to continue on a healthy developmental trajectory as they support their children:

• Strengthen young parents as the primary nurturer. Talk with young people about their questions and concerns about parenting.

• Don’t assume that because they are pregnant or parenting that they are knowledgeable about sex and sexuality.

• Help young parents continue to make progress toward their educational, literacy and employment goals.

• Continue to nurture their aspirations and meet their needs for new challenges and opportunities that support healthy brain development, at the same time they focus on their own children.

• Help young parents strengthen their relationships with each other and work together in caring for their children.

• Help both parents and children maintain good health and well-being.

• Make sure young parents can access and receive prenatal care and have access to well-baby medical visits and high-quality child care.
Conclusion: Connecting Youth to Identity, Networks and Community

The latest adolescent brain research continues to offer great promise for those working with youth in or emerging from foster care to promote growth, healing, hope, belonging and purpose. Sometimes youth who have experienced significant trauma may feel as though their foundation in life has been shaken, eroded or fractured. However, by improving the environment surrounding a young person, supporting his or her racial and ethnic identity and sexual orientation and understanding how the developing brain is driving behaviors but is still in a highly “neuroplastic” stage, we can support youth in and emerging from foster care rewire their brains to better regulate decision making as they enter the adult world. We know that adolescents will benefit from consistent relationships and connections with caring adults, developmentally sound and accessible opportunities to exercise risk and autonomy and the opportunity to nurture their great capacity for resilience. With the concerted efforts of caregivers, professionals throughout systems and youth themselves to apply the insights in this guide, the road leaving foster care can take young people to self-sufficiency and successful adulthood.
Glossary

**Ambiguous loss:** A form of loss in which there is no verification of death, no certainty that the person will come back or no assurance that the person will return to the way she or he used to be. This form of loss is characterized by having no clear boundaries, no clear ending and often no culturally or societally recognized rituals for grieving or even acknowledging what has been lost.

**Cerebral cortex:** The outer layer of the brain that plays a key role in memory, attention, perceptual awareness, thought, language and consciousness.

**Complex trauma:** The dual problem of exposure to multiple traumatic events and the impact of this exposure on immediate and long-term outcomes. For young people in foster care, examples of traumatic events may include poverty, neglect, physical and sexual abuse, separation from and loss of family, multiple moves and relationship disruptions.

**Dopamine:** A chemical in the brain that affects concentration, memory, problem solving and mental associations between action and pleasure.

**Emerging adulthood:** A developmental period from approximately 18–25 years old, during which a young person moves gradually from adolescence toward independence, rather than achieving adulthood at a predetermined age.

**Gray matter:** The brownish-gray matter in the brain that is associated with intelligence and intellect. This type of brain tissue is composed primarily of cell bodies, along with their dendrites. The purpose of gray matter is to pass along sensory input, gathering information from the sensory organs and other gray matter cells and ensuring that it gets where it needs to go. The speed of communication is determined by the white matter, so one could think of the gray and white matter as the central processing unit of the brain.

**Implicit bias (also known as unconscious bias):** Attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions and decisions in an unconscious manner.

**Institutional racism:** Racial and ethnic inequity within institutions and systems of power, such as places of employment, government agencies and social services.

**Interdependence:** The mutual reliance between two or more groups.

**Internalized oppression:** Believing in negative messages about oneself or one’s racial group.

**Legal permanence:** A child’s relationship with a parenting adult that is recognized by law, with the adult becoming the child’s birth, kin, foster, guardianship or adoptive parent. Legal permanence confers emotional, social, financial and other status.

**Limbic system:** The part of the brain associated with processing and managing emotion and motivation.

**Neurobiology:** The scientific study of the biology of the human brain.

**Neuroplasticity:** The ability of the brain to alter its structure in response to experience; the process by which the brain forms new neural pathways, removes old ones and alters the strength of existing connections.

**Normalcy:** Typical experiences of growing up — from working a summer job to joining the school band and getting a driver’s license — that are often out of reach for young people in foster care because of such factors as restrictive child welfare policies designed to keep children safe, frequent moves and the lack of funds and transportation.

**Prefrontal cortex:** The part of the brain that governs a person’s executive functions of reasoning, impulse control and advanced thought; the last part of the human brain to mature.

**Promotive factors:** Conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities or the larger society that actively enhance well-being.

**Protective factors:** Conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities or the larger society that mitigate or eliminate risk.

**Pruning:** A process in the brain through which unused or underused synapses are eliminated.

**Racial and ethnic equity and inclusion:** The state, quality or ideal of being just, impartial and fair and providing authentic and empowered participation and a true sense of belonging when it comes to race and ethnicity. To be achieved and sustained, racial equity needs to be thought of as a structural or systemic concept.
**Glossary continued**

**Relational permanence:** The many types of important long-term relationships that help a child or young person feel loved and connected — relationships with brothers and sisters, family friends and extended family, former foster family members and other caring adults.

**Resilience:** The ability to overcome adverse conditions and to function normatively in the face of risk.

**Risk:** The possibility of loss or injury.

**Social capital:** The value that is created by investing in relationships with others. Social capital reflects bonding between similar people and bridging between diverse people, with norms of trust and reciprocity.

**Structural racism:** Racial and ethnic bias across institutions and society; the cumulative and compounding effects of an array of factors that systematically privilege white people and disadvantage people of color.

**Acknowledgments**

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**Resources**

**Adolescent brain development and child welfare:**

**Foster parents as practitioners:**

**Permanency conversations with youth:**

**Race equity and inclusion:**

**Recognizing substance abuse:**

Endnotes


5. These terms are further defined in the glossary (see page 29). Also, see a fuller discussion of these concepts in The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2014). *Embracing equity: 7 steps to advance and embed race equity and inclusion within your organization.* Baltimore, MD: Author. Retrieved February 3, 2017, from www.aecf.org/resources/race-equity-and-inclusion-action-guide


36. Analysis of Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), FY 2014 Foster Care data file.

37. Analysis of Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), FY 2014 Foster Care data file.

