



Balancing permanency and stability for youth in foster care

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ABSTRACT

Youth aging out of the foster care system are at risk for poor outcomes. Little is known about the etiology of these outcomes. However, placement instability may be one contributor. Permanency planning as a policy was well-intentioned. However, for adolescents likely to age out of care, the policy may actually contribute to placement instability. A review of the elements of permanency reveals a complex concept which emphasizes continuity of relationships. Federal permanency legislation and state policy may be in conflict with this goal, especially for youth who age out of care. We review the challenges faced by youth aging out of care, their placement histories, permanency planning as a policy and practice, and suggest modifications to permanency planning to facilitate the development and maintenance of the stable social networks essential for successful transitions to adulthood.

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1. Introduction

Planning for permanency has been a cornerstone of child welfare practice for almost three decades. However, the realization of permanence remains elusive for many youth in substitute care. Our purpose is to examine permanency from multiple perspectives, review the most recent research on youth aging out of care, analyze the potentially conflicting goals of permanency as defined by policy and as experienced by youth, and to offer suggestions on how to support youth aging out of care.

1.1. Dimensions of permanency

Permanency has been described by foster care youth as consisting of relational permanence, physical permanence, and legal permanence (Sanchez, 2004). Relational permanence consists of long-term, loving, and accepting relationships and includes relationships with parental figures such as foster parents and biological parents and access to important people such as siblings, friends, extended family, and boy/girlfriends. Physical or ecological permanence consists of stability or sameness in the mezzo and macro systems in youths' lives such as school, neighborhood, community groups, and religious communities. It also includes stability in the norms, rules, expectations, customs, values, traditions, communication patterns, and culture which govern daily living. Legal permanence consists of a legal relationship between a youth and a caretaker (i.e., reunification,

adoption, guardianship). A primary goal of the child welfare system is to pursue legal permanence. While this goal can create both relational permanence and ecological permanence, the pursuit of legal permanence at the expense of relational and ecological permanence may be contributing to a state of impermanence among foster care youth.

The loss and disruption of norms, social networks, education, friendships, and significant relationships that characterizes the placement experiences of some youth in foster care can result in youth disconnecting from relationships. This disconnectedness can hinder youths' abilities to form trusting relationships and thus interfere with their likelihood of attaining legal permanence. When they subsequently age out of foster care, a history of placement instability may have also hindered their ability to develop the emotional and social competencies necessary to be successful in the abrupt transition to young adulthood from foster care. Thus, foster care placement instability interferes with the child welfare system's goal of achieving legal permanence for youth, and also interferes with the goal of preparing youth, who have not attained permanency, to be self-sufficient in young adulthood.

1.2. Youth aging out

Each year between 20,000 and 25,000 youth age out of care (Child Welfare League of America, 2005). These youth face considerable adversity in young adulthood. Employment, education, housing, criminal activity, physical and mental health, substance abuse, and child bearing all represent challenges to aging out youth.

Half of youth who age out of care do not have a high school diploma (Barth, 1990; Brandford & English, 2004; Cook, Fleishman, & Grimes, 1991; Reilly, 2003). In young adulthood, unemployment rates

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are high with 25% to 50% unemployed and even more experiencing periods of unemployment (Brandford & English, 2004; Courtney et al., 2005; Hughes et al., 2008; Reilly, 2003). The majority of young adults have incomes below the poverty line and at least one-third receive need-based government assistance (Barth, 1990; Brandford & English, 2004; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, and Nesmith, 2001; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2007; Hughes et al., 2008; Mech & Fung as reported in Mech, 2003; Reilly, 2003; Singer, 2006; Williams, Pope, Sirls, & Lally, 2005). Estimates of homelessness range from 10 to 40% with many reporting housing instability (Barth, 1990; Brandford & English, 2004; Cook, et al., 1991; Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney et al., 2007; Hughes et al., 2008; Pecora et al., 2005; Reilly, 2003; Williams et al., 2005).

Arrest rates are high with about one-third to one-half of young adults having been arrested and/or jailed after leaving foster care (Barth, 1990; Brandford & English, 2004; Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2007; Hughes et al., 2008; Reilly, 2003; Singer, 2006; Williams et al., 2005). Significant numbers of young adults report both health and mental health problems (Barth, 1990; Brandford & English, 2004; Courtney et al., 2001; Hughes et al., 2008; Pecora et al., 2005; Reilly, 2003). The lack of medical insurance makes prompt or appropriate intervention less likely (Mech & Fung as reported in Mech, 2003; Reilly, 2003). About one-quarter of young adults report substance use (Brandford & English, 2004; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2007; Hughes et al., 2008; Williams et al., 2005). Early child bearing is not uncommon. Between 30% and 75% of young adults have either been pregnant or been the parent of a child (Barth, 1990; Brandford & English, 2004; Cook, et al., 1991; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2007; Hughes et al., 2008; Mech & Fung as reported in Mech, 2003; Reilly, 2003; Singer, 2006; Williams et al., 2005).

These outcomes form part of the picture. For many youth aging out of care the lack of social supports makes the transition to adulthood even more difficult. Coping skills and self-competence can help ameliorate some of the disadvantages of aging out of care. Yet, foster youth with histories of placement instability may be less likely to have developed these necessary skills due to the disruption of social networks and connected relationships. Thus, the challenges become more acute.

Foster youth are at a heightened risk for negative outcomes due to many reasons and instability may be exacerbating their risks. They entered care due to maltreatment and/or abandonment. Many also lived in distressed and distressing environments characterized by poverty, domestic and community violence, parental substance abuse, and parental incarceration prior to their entry into foster care (Crosson-Tower, 2007; Taussig, 2002). Entry into care is often associated with losses of significant relationships and feelings of guilt and responsibility (Salah-Din & Bollman, 1994). These factors increase the risk for behavioral and mental health issues that interfere with normal development (Leslie et al., 2000; Shin, 2004). Youth who are not reunited with their families or placed in adoptive or guardianship homes can struggle with feelings of abandonment and rejection (Charles & Nelson, 2000). Loss of primary caretakers is often exacerbated by the loss of other family such as adult relatives and siblings. While many youth express strong desires to maintain sibling connections and be placed with siblings, few are (Freundlich, Avery, Gerstenzang, & Munson, 2006; Sanchez, 2004). This can also have a negative impact on their well-being (Gustavsson & MacEachron, *in press*).

These factors when combined with the “complex and cumulative instabilities” (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009, p. 265) associated with foster care may be why youth in foster care tend to be more at-risk than their peers with similar histories of maltreatment and environmental distress (Kortenkamp & Ehrle, 2002; Mech, 2003) and why youth from foster care fare no better than other high risk groups in young adulthood, even though they were likely been provided more services (Berzin, 2008; Buehler, Orme, Post, & Patterson, 2000; Kerman, Wildfire, & Barth, 2002).

2. Permanence among older youth in care

The passage of the Adoption Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) has been successful in increasing the number of adoptions from foster care. However, this has largely been the case for younger children, not youth (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). In 2005, of the 51,001 children and youth who were adopted from foster care, less than 15% were between the ages of 12 and 18, and only 7.65% were between the ages of 14 and 18. Furthermore, in federal fiscal year 2005, 7589 youth between the ages of 12–18 exited due to adoption while more than three times as many (24,407) exited foster care due to emancipation (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Indeed, the number of youth leaving care due to reaching the age of majority or emancipating has been steadily increasing since the passage of AFSA, as has the percent of the overall foster care population who emancipate (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2007).

Young people who enter care as adolescents and are not reunited with their former caregivers are far more likely to age out of care than to be adopted (Bass, Shields, & Behrman, 2004). The reasons for this are two-fold; there is a lack of adoptive homes for older youth (Charles & Nelson, 2000; Wertheimer, 2002) and contrary to the goals of the child welfare system, some youth do not want to be adopted (Kluger, Alexander, & Curtis, 2000; Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, & Barth, 2000). Furthermore, the developmental phase of adolescence, that of identity formation and increased independence necessitates peer group membership, an understanding of familial roots, and differentiation from primary caretakers. Forming new attachments to new primary caretakers can be difficult for some youth.

When asked about adoption, youth have stated that they do not want their biological families replaced and that adoption would cause them conflict over loyalties to their families of origin (Chambers, Zeilewski, & Malm, 2008; Sanchez, 2004). Some also question whether an adoption would actually result in long-term, loving relationships because they have seen adoptions disrupt and do not trust that someone, even someone who adopted them, would love them over the long-term (Samuels, 2008). Some youth have spoken of the losses associated with adoption because friends and siblings they knew who had been adopted “disappeared” after the adoption (Chambers, Zielewski, & Malm, 2008, p.2).

While youth still need and desire parental role models and guidance and the security, affection, and love of families (Sanchez, 2004), the child welfare system focuses on adoption as a primary way of meeting these needs, even though adoption often poses youth with difficult choices. The majority of youth who age out of care entered care as adolescents. Thus, they have extensive histories, identity formations, and connections with their birth families, and the cultures, customs, and values of their birth families. This can make the transition to the cultures of new families more difficult. Some adoptive homes may ask youth to give up their former connections and to assimilate into the adoptive families' customs, values, and worldviews. Additionally, at their entry into foster care, youth also belong to peer groups, have identities associated with their peer groups, and may be in romantic relationships. Yet in many placements, the rules or the limitations associated with the placement (e.g., distance) contribute to the loss of important friendships and some placements expect youth to develop relationships with the family before seeking out friendship and boy/girlfriend relationship outside the family. Furthermore, the timeframes of ASFA do not account for the history of relationships youth had prior to their entry into care. Expecting youth to forsake those relationships for new relationships that are often short-term may be unreasonable for many youth.

This does not mean that the ‘forever family’ or the life-long relationships and lasting connections so crucial to adolescent development are unattainable goals for foster care youth. Indeed, positive relationships are at the core of healthy development in relational-cultural theory, resiliency theory, and positive youth development

models. Furthermore, youth desire security and continuity in their relationships (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Palmer, 1996; Schofield, 2002; Samuels, 2008). Allowing youth to develop connections naturally and then pursuing these connections could create more relational permanence for youth than placement in potential permanent placements and hoping that relationships will develop.

The child welfare agency may be required by policy to pursue adoption or other forms of legal permanence. As a result youth may frequently move and experience disruption in their relationships. Policy requirements unintentionally disrupt relationships in the pursuit of a legal permanent relationship, yet the disruption of the previous relationships creates relational anxieties which limit youths' abilities to form new relationships. The meeting of agency goals such as movement into placements that may have potential for permanence and movement up and down in level of care has been identified as one of the most common reasons children and youth in foster care are moved (James, 2004; Zinn, DeCoursey, Goerge, & Courtney, 2006).

Once this placement cycle begins it can be self-perpetuating. Prior movement is the best predictor of future movement (Leathers, 2006; Webster, Barth & Needell, 2000). Several studies report that as youth move, they become distrustful of relationships and emotionally distance themselves from others (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009; Kools, 1997, 1999; Samuels, 2008). These self-protection coping mechanisms in turn create barriers to the establishment of new relationships which subsequently contribute to placement breakdowns. Thus, the search for legal permanence can result in impermanence because the pursuit of legal permanence may not be balanced against the youths' needs for relational and ecological permanence. Alternatively, if youth are provided stability and are able to secure a sense of ecological and relational permanence, they may be more open to exploring existing relationships as potential life-long relationships and these may even lead to legal permanence.

3. The prevalence and consequences of placement instability

Teens in foster care are more prone to placement instability than their younger cohorts (Wertheimer, 2002; Wulczyn, Kogan, & Harden, 2003). Those who age out of foster care have likely experienced some of the highest rates of placement instability. In quantitative studies with children and youth in foster care, placement instability has been found to correlate positively with behavioral problems, low educational achievement, identity confusion, low self-esteem, drug use, and social network disruption (Ayasse, 1995; Barber & Delfabbro, 2003; Blome, 1997; Dore & Eisner, 1993; Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, & Egolf, 2003; Mech, 2003; Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000; Perry, 2006; Salah-Din & Bollman, 1994; Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2000; Timberlake & Verdick, 1987). Juvenile and young adult arrests and incarceration have also been linked to foster care placement instability (Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2000; Ryan, Hernandez, & Herz, 2007). While many research studies have found a correlation between problem behavior and placement instability (Barber & Delfabbro, 2003; Delfabbro, Barber, & Cooper, 2002; Dore & Eisner, 1993; Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000), a recent study found that placement instability had a significant effect on behavioral well-being unrelated to well-being at entry into care (Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, & Localio, 2007). Thus, instability itself has a direct negative impact on well-being.

Qualitative studies with youth in care and young adults formerly in care have also consistently found themes of pervasive loss, isolation, loneliness and disconnection due to placement instability. Unrau, Seita, and Putney (2008) found that not only did former foster youth remember the loss of friends and connections to school and other social groups associated with placement movements, but also the loss of their sense of control over their lives, the loss of a sense of normalcy, and the loss of their important belongings were also profoundly experienced. Kools (1997, 1999) found that identity formation was

delayed due to their active resistance to engaging in close relationships and a stigmatized sense of self that developed as they continually moved. Samuels (2008) noted that young adults formerly in foster care continued to believe that relationships were ultimately unpredictable and unreliable thus many did not rely on social networks for support. She also found that young adults mourned the loss of anyone in their lives with whom they had relational longevity; they had no one in their lives who knew their history, understood how they had developed over time, or remained committed to them and this impacted how they interacted with others. Hyde and Kammerer (2009) spoke with youth who had frequently moved and noted their "apathy and emotional emptiness" (p. 271). Lee and Whiting (2007) likened many experiences in foster care to the feelings of ambiguous loss and noted that the children with whom they spoke expressed feelings of hopelessness, confusion and ambivalence about their futures.

While states do relatively well at ensuring there is some degree of stability within the first year of placement, as the length of stay in foster care increases, the number of placements increases. In 2005 the median percent of children and youth with two or fewer placements who had been in care for less than 12 months was 83.3, but fell to 32.3 for those who had been in care for two years or more (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Literature on placement instability primarily investigates the stability of rates of children and youth in care for 18 months or less. However, the placement stability of youth in long-term foster care can be extrapolated from recent young adult studies.

Youth who exited care in Alaska spent, on average, seven years in foster care and had an average of thirteen placements (Williams, Pope, Sirls, & Lally, 2005). Among Washington foster care youth preparing to age-out, over one-third had been in ten or more placements, with two-thirds experiencing four or more. Of these young adults, almost half entered care when they were age 13 or older (English, 2003). Even when placements in residential care, group homes, and shelters were excluded, (which had been experienced by the majority) over one-third of youth about to exit foster care from Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa, had been in four or more foster home placements (Courtney et al., 2004). An Arizona study of young adults from foster care found that they had been in care on average 3.73 years and had an average of 8.02 placements (Stott, 2009). These numbers indicate that youth who will age out of care move about every six months.

Most placement changes involve not only changes in every system and subsystem in which the youth are involved, but also significant losses. Youth are removed from all that is familiar. Friends, family, employers, teachers, coaches, clergy, health/mental health providers, team mates, and pets can be lost. Possessions, pictures, and mementos are also at great risk of disappearing. These are significant losses for an adolescent to sustain repeatedly (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2008).

School changes affect academic performance and the ability to meet the graduation requirements of differing districts. Placement instability has been identified as one of the greatest hindrances to foster youths' academic success (Burley & Halpern, 2001). In one study, a quarter of 16 to 17 year-olds in foster care had changed schools five or more times due to placement changes, and 30% had missed a month of school or more due to a placement change (Shin & Poertner, 2002). The majority of youth respondents in another study experienced at least one mid-year school change while in foster care (McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White & Thompson, 2003). Not only do academics suffer, but also the social aspect of school is disrupted, as well. Every six months, these youth must be the new kid in class, wonder where to sit at lunch, and with which group she/he can associate. Involvement in extracurricular activities is often unlikely because try-out dates have passed, or the group is not structured to accept newcomers. Therefore, their commitment to school can decline as do positive feelings associated with going to school. This may contribute to the high dropout rate for foster care youth.

In addition to the social aspects of school, changes in placement result in changes in other social networks, as well. Friendships abruptly end; boy/girlfriend relationships are terminated, sometimes without an opportunity to say good-bye; involvement in religious/spiritual groups and congregations are disrupted; and access to community assets such as youth centers, or safe neighborhood parks with opportunities to play pick-up basketball or skateboard may no longer be available. If youth have part-time jobs, they typically must quit. All of these social network disruptions during the identity formation phase of adolescence create significant barriers to youth feeling a sense of belonging, a sense of control, a sense of community contribution, or to believing that their voices and experiences are important to others.

The rules, values, cultures, traditions, and norms change with each placement as well. On average, youth in long-term foster care, spend every winter holiday season in a different placement with different people. This can prevent them from developing their own sense of tradition and spiritual significance associated with holidays. Messages are inconsistent about smoking, drinking, the use of substances, and sexual activities, as well. In one placement, the providers may prohibit the youth from dating while in another placement the providers may supply the youth with condoms. Similarly in one home, the prevailing message about substances may be a primarily tolerant one that allows for exploration so long as there are no adverse consequences while in another home, smoking marijuana once may be seen as cause for immediate removal from the placement. These messages may leave youth confused about their own value systems and beliefs about substance use and sexuality.

Frustration can also result from the rule changes that accompany placement changes. For example, a young woman might have worked for weeks for the money to buy a dress for a dance only to be moved to a group home with a level system that does not allow any new foster child to attend unsupervised activities during the first month of placement. Or in contrast, a youth may have successfully worked a level system in a group home in order to gain e-mail or internet privileges only to be moved to a foster home that does not allow any of the children in the home to have unsupervised time on-line. This loss of control over one's own circumstances and ability to plan for the future may be one reason why young women in foster care in one recent study expressed ambiguity over preventing pregnancy (Love, McIntosh, Rosst, & Tertzakian, 2005). Indeed Kools (1999) found that a lack of future planning was a predominant theme among the youth with whom she spoke; they had developed a "here and now" (p.150) attitude in response to multiple moves.

In sum, not only do the youth experience changes in their micro environments, but also the entire broader social environment changes with each change in placement; and these changes occur often. This is an especially troubling state for youth who will age out of care and will be expected to be self-sufficient with scant safety nets.

4. Policies' influence on placement instability

Although placement stability has been identified as an important factor associated with the well-being of youth in foster care (Child Welfare League of America, 2005), few studies have examined its long-term impact or how it affects youth developmentally. Furthermore, few policy provisions have been put in place to attempt to slow or reduce placement movement, and the unintended consequences of some policies have resulted in increased movement.

Youth can change placements for a variety of reasons. Caretakers can ask that a youth be removed due to their own familial situations (moving, needing the room for an aging parent or rebounding child, becoming unexpectedly pregnant, or a younger child free for adoption becoming available). The agency can also move a youth to a less restrictive and more cost efficient setting such as from congregate care to foster care. Movement is also often due to agency's desires to

conform to federal mandates and try adoptive or guardianship homes for the youth. The actions are well intended, but result in more movement. Furthermore, few youth agree that they are consulted about their own permanency plans or that they are actively engaged in decisions about placements (Chambers, Zielwski, & Malm, 2008; Freundlich, Avery, Gerstenzang, Munson, 2006; Sanchez, 2004).

As tenure in substitute care increases so does the likelihood of multiple placements. Maas and Engler (1959) identified this in their classic study that is now 50 years old. They reported that after 18 months in care the likelihood of reunification decreases and the likelihood of multiple placements increase. Foster care drift has been a child welfare concern for decades. In 1980, the federal government mandated permanency planning in an attempt to increase exits from foster care to permanent homes. P.L. 96-262, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (AACWA) requires states to make reasonable efforts to keep families together, and to plan for permanency outcomes. Periodic reviews at six months and a permanency hearing at 18 months would help to ensure that progress was being made. Four types of permanency outcomes were outlined in the legislation: reunification, adoption, guardianship, or long-term foster care. A caveat of this act mandates that children and youth be maintained in the least restrictive placement (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Group homes are considered more restrictive than foster homes, thus youth can be removed from group homes because a foster home bed becomes available. That bed may be in another school district, in another community, far from their siblings, extended family, and friends.

PL96-272 has been amended over the years and new legislation has been introduced. The Adoption Child Welfare Act (ASFA) of 1997, for example, attempted to speed up the permanency process by decreasing the timelines for filing for termination of parental rights. Of note are provisions which offer states incentives to place special needs children in adoptive homes. In the 2003 Adoption Promotion Act, children over the age of nine are defined as special needs (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Long-term foster care was no longer a desirable option as a case plan goal. State laws vary but some states require an extensive justification for a long-term foster care goal, now known as another planned permanent living arrangement or APPLA. This can result in youth being removed from long-term foster homes and non-adoptive relative homes and placed into families licensed for both foster care and adoption.

The Child and Family Services Reviews do examine placement stability, and it is a measure that is collected and assessed in the Child Welfare Outcomes Reports. These reports indicate that while states are making progress in achieving higher rates of adoption and reunification for younger children, they are making less progress in achieving placement stability for the children and youth, especially for children and youth who remain in care for two or more years (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Thus, placement movement is an unintended consequence of policies designed to promote permanency and prevent youth from growing up in substitute care. Additionally, as is seen in ASFA's preference for pre-adoptive homes over other long-term homes, the concept of permanency, at the policy level, has been primarily restricted to legal permanence. There are no policy provisions that account for youths' feelings of relational permanence.

Over a quarter of a century ago, Maluccio and Fein (1983) defined permanency planning to include "... a set of goal-directed activities designed to help children live in families that offer continuity of relationships with nurturing parents or caretakers and the opportunity to establish lifetime relationships" (p.197). While policy has continued to focus on the first part of Maluccio and Fein's definition of permanency, which is continuity with parents or caretakers, there has been little legislative attention given to the importance of maintaining life-long relationships. Sibling groups can be broken apart, visitation with extended family is not prioritized, and there may be few resources (i.e. long distance calling cards, e-mail accounts, transportation on

weekends) given to youth to help them maintain relationships with friends and peer groups. Thus policy provisions may ignore the ecosystem changes associated with placement instability and instead focus on the possibility of legal permanence.

The federal government plays an important role in determining placements through funding. An emphasis on adoption as a desirable and financially rewarded outcome can influence agency operations. When state governments increase the number of adoptions they receive additional federal funds. When states use guardianship as a permanency vehicle, there is no fiscal reward from the federal government. Since PL.96-272 adoption has been a priority goal at the federal level. Adoption provisions have been a part of or the centerpiece of most of the major child welfare legislation since 1980. The government has decided that adoption is a desirable public policy. However, it may not be an appropriate option for all youth in the child welfare system.

The legislation has been an attempt to provide foster children with much needed stability and to provide many of them the opportunity for a 'forever family.' However, legal definitions of permanence may not match the perceptions of foster youth and their definition of permanence. The legislation does not require agencies to ascertain if foster youth have a sense that someone is planning their journey through substitute care nor does it require child welfare agencies to have input from the youth when they make decisions about placement changes. It is unclear how the intended recipients of permanency planning see the process of securing stability or how they would evaluate the outcomes of this process.

5. Rethinking the pursuit of permanence

The research suggests that youth who exit care to a legally permanent relationship do better than those who emancipate. However, the pursuit of permanence for older youth must be balanced with placement stability. Movement for the sole reason of decreasing the number of youth in congregate care is not necessarily in youths' best interests. Movement through a number of foster homes in one year is likely to be less positive than maintenance in one congregate care facility throughout that year, especially if the youth was experiencing relational stability in the congregate facility.

According to several pilot projects with this population, legal permanence for older youth in care is more likely to be achieved when the process involves direct input from the youth, existing relationships are promoted and supported, and both the potential caretakers and youth are allowed to proceed toward discussions of legal permanence slowly and naturally (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006; Louisell, n.d.). Youth who identify relationships they believe in are more likely to be invested in making those relationships work than youth who are moved into an available foster home. One way for youth to form connections in the community and develop relationships with possible caregivers is for them to have stability in that community. Once youth feel secure in a placement, they may reach out and engage in relationships that could ultimately lead to guardianship or adoption (Frey, Cushing, Freundlich, Brenner, 2007).

Due to the inability of congregate care settings to be able to provide legal permanence, they are often viewed as less favorable options. Group homes can be a stable place for youth. If a youth is able to achieve ecological permanence with school stability and find belonging groups, they may be likely to find naturally occurring mentors and positive relationships with teachers, the parents of friends, coaches, and community group leaders. Family style group homes may be especially helpful in rural communities and communities with low foster home saturation but high rates of removals. Youth in these communities may prefer the ecological and relational permanence offered through continuity in their community and school and close proximity to siblings, family, and friends, than to a home in a different community and school district.

One systemic-related reason youth are moved is to conform to the provision of AACWA which requires that youth be placed in the least restrictive level of care possible. Youth in group homes may be moved to foster homes to meet this level of care requirement. Youths' voices need to be considered when making decisions about the restrictiveness of placements. Not all steps down in levels of care actually result in less restrictiveness (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009); and youths' individual circumstances would need to be considered when making decisions about the restrictions placements impose on the youth. A lack of transportation to and from a club or community group may be restrictive to one youth, whereas not being able to make unmonitored phone calls may be restrictive to another youth. The replacement of youth to meet agency goals of potential permanency may be short sighted. If a youth is adamantly opposed to a placement, the placement is less likely to be successful and may result in the youth running away.

There are instances when a placement change is likely to offer youth greater opportunities for life-long relationships, such as move to a kinship home. These moves are likely to be successful when they are planned and both the youth and the family are prepared. Some moves could wait until semester breaks to ensure that school credits are not lost. Placements will also be more successful if visits occur prior to the placement and the family and youth are clear as to the expectations of both.

6. Conclusion

For youth in care, the search for legal permanency can result in placement instability and may diminish the ability of youth to attain relational and ecological permanency. The pursuit of permanency, when not balanced with youths' well-being, can hinder youths' willingness to engage in relationships. The intrapersonal and interpersonal social and emotional competencies youth need to be resilient in their transition to young adulthood should be supported. The child welfare system will need to include policy provisions which allow for stable placements even if they do not initially meet the standards of legal permanence. The goal of promoting youths' engagement in life-long relationships is of paramount importance.

The standard array of services such as employment training, housing assistance, medical care, mentoring, social services, tutoring and academic support and advocacy with educational systems, and opportunities to develop leadership skills form the base. More is needed for youth to develop the network of relationships with formal and informal mentors and organizations that can help them navigate the transition to adulthood (Kaplan, Skolnik & Turnbull, 2009).

Powerlessness can be the hallmark of foster youth. Agencies and courts make decisions with varying degrees of input from youth. Empowerment of foster care youth should be part of their earliest experiences. They need to be included as empowered participators in their permanency plans and in decisions about placements. Their view of service plans and placement changes should be documented in case files. Youth should be offered the opportunity and the means to attend their court hearings so they may speak to the judge. While these are small steps they establish the concept that youth can be active players in the child welfare system; and, by extension have a sense of control over their destiny.

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