

## Measuring youth connections: A component of relational permanence for foster youth

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents the development and preliminary validation of the Youth Connections Scale, a measure of youth connectedness as a component of relational permanence for youth in out-of-home placement. The instrument measures different domains of youth's connectedness, including the number and strength of connections to caring adults and the types of support perceived by youth. Results of a pilot validation study of the instrument, with a sample of 53 adolescents in out-of-home care, indicate good concurrent validity and high test–retest reliability. Child welfare and youth-serving agencies can use this instrument in their efforts to strengthen and measure the connectedness and relational permanence of youth.

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### 1. Introduction

Youth need the support of caring adults. Youth who are placed in out-of-home care often come into placement with connections to adults who are important in their lives; yet, many of these connections are lost while youth are in care. Many experts and scholars now advocate for child welfare agencies to increase their focus on building permanent, supportive connections for youth while in out-of-home care (Charles & Nelson, 2000; Samuels, 2009). Legal permanence, defined as the reunification, adoption, or transfer of legal guardianship of the youth, remains a critical goal to achieve for youth in child welfare systems. However, not all youth who exit foster care achieve legal permanence. In recent years relational permanence has been introduced as a concept that is equally important. Relational permanence is defined as youth experiencing a sense of belonging through enduring, life-long connections to parents, extended family or other caring adults, including at least one adult who will provide a permanent, parent-like connection for that youth (Brown, Léveillé, & Gough, 2006). For many youth, legal and relational permanence are achieved through the same efforts, by reunifying youth with their parents or when youth are adopted by family members or other caring adults. As child welfare agencies work towards the goal of permanence, best practices ensure they also build and strengthen connections to supportive adults for youth in out-of-home care.

Research findings indicate that the benefits for youth of being connected to supportive adults include positive long-term effects on youths' social, psychological, and financial outcomes, including improved self-esteem, educational achievement, and social skill development (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Massinga & Pecora, 2004; Perry, 2006). Connecting foster youth to supportive adults and creating a financial and emotional safety net is particularly critical during late adolescence as youth begin to transition to adulthood.

Child welfare professionals are also paying increased attention to older youth who have long-term foster care or independent living as a permanency goal. In 2010, 11% of the 254,114 children and youth who exited foster care in the United States were emancipated or “aged out” of care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012). Recent studies highlight that youth who age out of care without legal permanency experience increased risk of homelessness, early pregnancy, incarceration, victimization, and poverty (Barth, 1990; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Hook & Courtney, 2011). Youth who aged out of care were more likely to have dropped out of high school, experienced unemployment, had histories of job instability and, on average, were paid less than their non-foster youth counterparts (Cook, 1994; Courtney et al., 2001; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Mallon, 1998). Many youth experienced instability in housing with as many as 25% of youth reporting being homeless for at least one night (Courtney et al., 2001).

Foster youth without supportive connections also experienced risks related to their socio-emotional well-being with increased incidence of mental health and behavioral problems, including depression (Barth, 1990). Alternatively, other studies indicate that youth who reported higher levels of social support from friends and family had improved health and developmental outcomes and increased

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resilience (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). Several studies that have looked at these important caring connections, also called “natural mentors,” found that youth with at least one caring adult were more likely to have better well-being outcomes, including better physical health, less stress, improved mental health, improved educational and economic attainment, and higher life satisfaction as an adult (Ahrens et al., 2011; Greeson, Usher, & Grinstein-Weiss, 2009; Munson & McMillen, 2009).

Youth also noted increased sense of self-identity when able to maintain relationships with family and other adults important in their lives (Lenz-Rashid, 2009). Unfortunately, feedback from many former foster youth indicates they felt they had little say in maintaining the most important relationships in their lives (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). In several studies, youth reported an overall lack of emotional support when leaving care, reporting feelings of isolation and disconnection (Ahrens et al., 2011; Geenen & Powers, 2007). Lenz-Rashid (2009) surveyed former foster youth who felt that their child welfare workers did not do enough to strengthen their relational permanence by failing to connect them to adults who might be stable, enduring supports for them after exiting care.

Evidence suggests that many youth seek out relationships with their biological family after leaving foster care (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). In a qualitative study by Samuels (2009), many youth reported unmet relational needs upon reconnecting with biological family after exiting care, highlighting the complex and dynamic nature of the relationships of foster youth with kin and non-kin networks. Child welfare organizations are beginning to recognize and utilize the opportunity to work with youth while in out-of-home care, to help youth address issues of grief and loss, and to help youth build positive connections with their families and other supportive adults (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006).

Along with changes in practice and emerging research, policy shifts also promote the efforts of engaging supportive adults, extended families, and communities in caring for youth at risk of out-of-home placement, such as the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Geen, 2009). Earlier policies, as early as the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, provided an important framework and foundation for child welfare that underscored the importance of familial and community connections for youth and promoted well-being by mandating active efforts of child welfare professionals to maintain the cultural, familial and spiritual ties that are critically important to youths' identity development.

Young people, in general, need the safety net of financial, social and emotional support from caring adults or parent-like figures, and this support often continues well into young adulthood, through age 25. This safety net is not always available to young people leaving foster care. Although child welfare and youth serving organizations are paying increased attention to relational permanence, no valid and reliable instruments exist to measure this construct. The *Youth Connections Scale* (YCS) was developed to begin to fill this gap, and to help child welfare agencies and organizations better work with youth in strengthening the safety net of supportive adults and measure the level of relational permanence for youth in out-of-home placement care. This article outlines the development and pilot testing of the validity and reliability of the YCS.

## 2. Relational permanence

Recent scholarly and professional dialogue in child welfare expands the meaning of permanence, by reconsidering the multidimensionality of legal, physical and relational permanence (Freundlich, Avery, Munson, & Gerstenzang, 2006). Legal permanence in child welfare is achieved through (1) reunification of a child or youth with their biological parents or legal guardians; (2) adoption; or (3) transfer of legal guardianship. Physical permanence reflects the stable and continuous placement of the youth with the same caregiver. However, many youth report that the relational aspects of permanence are the most important to them (Samuels, 2009; Sanchez, 2004). It

is often within the most important relationships with parents and family that youth find relational permanence. In addition to defining relational permanence as youth having lifelong connections to caring adults, including at least one parent-like connection, relational permanence can also be understood as youth experiencing a sense of belonging and a deeper understanding of who they are and how they fit into the world (Brown et al., 2006; Samuels, 2009). Three aspects of relational permanence are outlined in this section, including the (1) social connectedness of youth; (2) establishing a safety net for youth; and (3) youth experiencing a sense of belonging.

### 2.1. Social connectedness of youth

Success in establishing and maintaining social relations is important for healthy development, as social relations are among a person's most fundamental sources of positive functioning and well-being (Perry, 2006). Youth development literature outside of foster care contexts has long identified the benefits for youth of being connected to supportive adults (Massinga & Pecora, 2004; Perry, 2006). Some studies indicate that multiple sources of support from multiple networks are linked to improved outcomes for foster youth (Perry, 2006); while other research indicates support from even one to three adults can increase successful outcomes for youth including educational, social and financial achievement (Search Institute, 2006; Ahrens et al., 2011).

Research on social support for youth aging out of care has revealed that many youth report feeling isolated and disconnected from supports that were once a part of their daily lives in care (Lenz-Rashid, 2009; Samuels, 2009; Sanchez, 2004). Some studies found that youth have little, if any, direct family support or other community networks to ease their transition into adulthood (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006; Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003). In addition to feeling isolated, some youth reported feeling unprepared for establishing new connections and supports (Barth, 1990; Courtney et al., 2001). The unique experience of being in foster care may also pose challenges to youths' understanding of interpersonal relationships, including distrust (Bamba & Haight, 2006; Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Interpersonal relationships provide means for reciprocal support, establishment of social norms and obligations, and sharing of information and resources. The value of the social networks and the benefits that flow from these networks is an asset that is also referred to as social capital (Coleman, 1988). The lack of interpersonal relationships, and thus lack of social capital, sets youth at a disadvantage for achieving later positive outcomes and sustained well-being (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Sanchez, 2004). Social capital can act as a protective factor for youth transitioning to adulthood, when youth find emotional and concrete types of support in stable relationships with caring adults (Avery & Freundlich, 2009). Studies have indicated that former foster youth who had some continuity of relationships with significant others, including siblings, foster parents, and biological parents, had better adult developmental outcomes than those who lacked these supports (Kerman, Wildfire, & Barth, 2002).

### 2.2. Establishing a safety net for youth

For many young people in the general population, financial, social and emotional support from their parents continues well into young adulthood. Transition to adulthood is often a long process during which young people may leave and return home again on three or more occasions (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006). This transitional period, termed emerging adulthood, is described by Arnett (2000) as a unique period in which young people age 18 to 25 are working towards independence by addressing specific developmental tasks such as increased logical reasoning, increased sense of responsibility and interdependence with others, and establishing healthy adult relationships. Throughout this extended process of emerging adulthood, ideally, there is continued availability of the family home as a “safety

net” of extended support (Arnett, 2000; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006). For youth, this safety net can include biological family, extended family, and family-like connections of other caring and supportive adults who have become like a “chosen” family.

This safety net of caring adults is not always available to young people leaving out-of-home care suggesting a lack of systematic support in child welfare to assist youth in finding family-like connections prior to and after leaving foster care, which can then become the safety net for youth throughout their life (Propp et al., 2003). All children in out-of-home placement, and older youth in particular, need stability and need to maintain connections with kin and non-kin who can be a crucial resource as youth transition to adulthood (Massinga & Pecora, 2004).

Research findings support the notion that a safety net is protective for youth across many risk conditions, including poor educational and employment outcomes, periods of homelessness and early pregnancy (Courtney et al., 2001; Greeson et al., 2009). The risks of aging out of care without family or family-like connections are well documented, including risks of school drop-out; unemployment and underemployment; and homelessness (Hook & Courtney, 2011). However, in one study, several former foster youths attributed their success to just one person who supported them in concrete ways, such as giving the youth a place to stay, lending the youth a car for getting to work, or helping the youth get training (Massinga & Pecora, 2004). In another study of natural mentors, or caring adults who were already part of the youths' lives, researchers found that former foster youth who had an adult who was parent-like and provided guidance and advice were more likely to have increased assets as an adult (Greeson et al., 2009).

Having a safety net of caring adults not only increases the social capital of youth, but it also may improve a youth's later financial security as well. Hook and Courtney (2011) found that youth aging out of care from group care or residential facilities were more likely to experience unemployment compared to youth who were in foster care at the time of exit. The researchers hypothesized that the experience of living with a family may strengthen the youth's social capital as well as provide potential on-going connections that add to youth's financial stability and safety net.

### 2.3. Sense of belonging

Finding permanency is important for all youth in foster care, but the change in legal status alone may not provide youth a sense of connectedness and belonging (Bamba & Haight, 2006; Barth, 1990; Cook, 1994; Courtney et al., 2001). Central to understanding well-being for some cultures includes finding a place where a person feels a sense of peace, security, satisfaction, acceptance, belonging, and space to be oneself (Bamba & Haight, 2006). Whether or not legal permanence is achieved, caring adults and biological family members may be able to help provide relational permanency for youth in care or exiting care. By providing links to the youth's own history, these adults and kin can provide “relational continuity,” and help youth in understanding their identity and sense of self (Samuels, 2009).

Foster youth may also need assistance in dealing with loss and grief around separation from biological families, making peace with their biological families, and establishing connections with family and other significant adults in their social environment (Henry, 2005; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006). Samuels (2009) describes youths' experience of ambiguous loss, which includes often unnamed and unaddressed grief and ambivalence of: being removed from their family systems; enduring feelings of loyalty to biological families or foster families; multiple sense of self within these family identities; and feelings of isolation or betrayal from lost relationships. In dealing with issues of grief and loss, youth may be better prepared for permanent, lifelong connections, which is an important step in achieving successful outcomes into adulthood.

Consistent with the increased practice efforts in strengthening the important role of supportive adult and kin connections for youth in out-of-home placement, scholars are also recommending that relational

permanence be tracked along with other permanency data (Lenz-Rashid, 2009). However, no valid and reliable measures of youth connectedness and relational permanence of youth in out-of-home placement are available. This article introduces a measure, the Youth Connections Scale (YCS), which fills this current gap in the field, was developed in order to fill a need in child welfare: the need to evaluate and measure the increased efforts of agencies to improve the level of connectedness of youth in foster care.

## 3. Development of the Youth Connections Scale

### 3.1. Introduction of the YCS

Based upon a review of current research on youth connections to caring adults, the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) at the University of Minnesota in partnership with a treatment foster care agency, Anu Family Services developed the YCS to measure the overall level of connectedness of youth in out of home placement. In four sections, the YCS measures five domains of connectedness and relational permanence, including: (1) indicators of engagement of youth in the permanency process; (2) the number of meaningful connections or relationships the youth has with supportive adults, (3) the strength of those connections, including the frequency of contact and the consistency of the support the adult provides for the youth, (4) the specific types of supports that have been identified as most important in the literature and feedback from former foster youth, and (5) the overall level of connectedness of foster youth to caring and supportive adults. The YCS is scored on a scale of 0 to 100, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of perceived relational permanence.

### 3.2. Description of the YCS

The Youth Connections Scale was designed to be completed jointly by youth with their workers to measure the youths' perceptions about their level of connectedness and the strength of their relational permanence. The YCS was also developed for older youth in out-of-home care, youth ages 15 to 21, who are transitioning to adulthood. The tool includes both newly developed indicators and adapted constructs used by other agencies working towards emotional and relational permanence of youth. (See the Appendix A for a sample copy of the YCS.)

The first section of the tool is meant to capture specific processes that social workers use to identify and engage youth, their families and other adults in their support networks. This section assesses whether or not a genogram, ecomap, and/or Lifebook have been completed with the youth, tools commonly used in child welfare and youth serving agencies to identify important connections in a youth's life. There are a number of emerging models designed to strengthen the relational permanence and level of connectedness of youth in out-of-home placement. Two models that were reviewed in the development of the YCS include the *Family Search and Engagement (FSE)* model and the *3-5-7 Model* (Henry, 2005; Louisell, 2008). The *FSE* model focuses on intensive family finding used to identify, locate and engage extended family and other supportive adults for youth in foster care. The goal of the *3-5-7 Model* is to help youth deal with issues of grief and ambiguous loss, in order to help prepare them for permanency.

The second section of the YCS measures the number of meaningful and supportive relationships youth have with adults at the time the instrument is completed. The youth are asked to write down the number of meaningful connections in each category. With the help of their social worker, youth can determine which of their relationships with adults are meaningful, as defined as adults with whom they have some regular contact and those adults they can rely on for some type of financial, emotional or social support.

The third section identifies the youth's key relationships and assesses the strength of those relationships. Relationship categories included in

this section were identified in the research literature as the most significant relationships for youth, including parents, siblings and relatives. The framework for assessing the strength of the key relationships was adapted from prior studies and evaluations of youth connections and social supports (Gerrard, Shelton, Skrypek, & Mortenson, 2008).

The literature on youth aging out of care indicates many risk factors for youth who are not well supported. Section four assesses the youth's perception of the types of support they receive from the caring adults in their life. Youth are asked to think about adults in their life who will provide each type of support after the youth leaves foster care. This section was developed based on the literature by scholars and researchers of youth aging out of care (Barth, 1990; Courtney et al., 2001). Additionally, development of this section was also informed by practice tools, such as the *Permanency Pact*, which was developed by the *Foster Club* (2006) to establish a structured process that brings the supportive adult and youth together, to help clarify their relationship and mutual expectations. This section was also informed by a tool created by Casey Family Services, called the Belonging and Emotional Security Tool (BEST) (Frey, Cushing, Freundlich, & Brenner, 2008). The BEST tool is a measure of emotional security that was designed to be used by youth and their foster parents to explore feelings of connectedness and belonging.

The final section of the tool is a culmination of the indicators used in the other sections, and provides an ordinal measure of the overall level of connectedness, including a measure of the youth's perception of their legal and relational permanence. The definitions of permanence used in this section were adapted from the California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP), which defines permanence as both a process and outcome that results in the youth having a lifelong connection to a caring adult who will provide a permanent, parent-like connection for that youth, including the legal rights of family membership when possible (Louisell, 2008).

### 3.3. Expert review panel

After the initial construction of the YCS, as described in the preceding section, a panel of experts in the field of child welfare reviewed the scale. The panel consisted of a team of six researchers and a team of seven professional child welfare staff, which included two administrators, two supervisors, two social workers and one former treatment foster parent. These two teams of experts were asked to examine the YCS and provide feedback on the face validity of the scale, including reflections on the whether or not the YCS covered the significant domains and aspects of the construct of youth connectedness as one component of relational permanence of youth in out-of-home care. The teams also provided feedback regarding the clarity of wording and formatting and the anticipated ease of use by social workers and youth. Based on feedback from the expert panels, the YCS appeared to have strong face validity, and we made minor revisions to improve the clarity and ease of use of the measure.

### 3.4. Pre-testing of the YCS

The revised YCS was pre-tested with three social workers in a treatment foster care agency, who tested the scale with a total of seven youth. After completing the instrument with the youth, the workers were asked a series of reflective questions about the instrument and the process of completing the scale with the youth. The questions included reflections on the amount of time needed to complete the tool; the ability of youth to understand and complete the tool with their worker's help; any specific challenges or surprises the workers experienced in the process. Feedback from the pre-testing indicated that (1) the instrument was thorough and easy to use; (2) using the YCS facilitated new dialogue and discussion with youth on relational aspects of permanence; (3) many of the youth enjoyed the process; and (4) the social workers felt that the data gathered from the youth using the YCS largely accorded with the workers' perception of the youth's level of connectedness.

Minor points of clarity were noted on the instrument, and based on this feedback the instrument was revised one final time.

## 4. Methods

### 4.1. Study sample

The aim of this current pilot study was to test the validity and reliability of the newly developed YCS. The study sample included 53 adolescents who met the eligibility criteria, which included the following: (1) youth were between the ages of 15 and 21; (2) youth were currently in out-of-home placement; (3) youth were cognitively and developmentally able to complete the survey with their social worker (as assessed by the social worker in consultation with their supervisor); and (4) youth had been in foster care for three months or longer. Subjects were recruited from three public and five private child welfare agencies. Youth in the study sample ranged in age from 15 to 20, with a mean age of 17.2 (see Fig. 1). In the study sample, 42% of the youth were recruited from public child welfare agencies (N=22) and 58% of the youth were from private child welfare and treatment foster care agencies (N=31).

### 4.2. Data collection and data analysis

Data was collected by the youths' social workers in participating agencies. All participating social workers completed a 45 minute orientation training with one of the researchers either in-person or via Skype, which included: (1) a review of the informed consent process for social workers and youth participating in the study; (2) detailed instructions on completing and scoring the YCS; and (3) a review of overall study procedures and data privacy protocols.

#### 4.2.1. Test–retest reliability of YCS

In order to establish test–retest reliability of the YCS, the social workers assisted the youth in completing the instrument at two points in time. Time One (T1) occurred at the convenience of the social worker and the youth. Time Two (T2) occurred between one and two weeks following Time One to assess the test–retest reliability of the Youth Connections Scale. The testing at T1 required an average of 25 min to complete both scales, and the testing at T2 took an average of 15 min to complete the YCS. Data analysis of the test–retest reliability consisted of a test of the Pearson product–moment correlation coefficient between the scores at T1 and T2.

#### 4.2.2. Test of concurrent validity

To test the concurrent validity of the YCS, when the youth were asked to completed the YCS at T1 they also completed a portion of an existing validated scale, the *Social Support Behaviors* (SSB) Scale, which measures a similar construct of supportive relationships, focusing on specific types of supportive behavior perceived to be available by the instrument-taker (Vaux, Riedel, & Stewart, 1987). The SSB Scale included a subscale that measured types of support of family

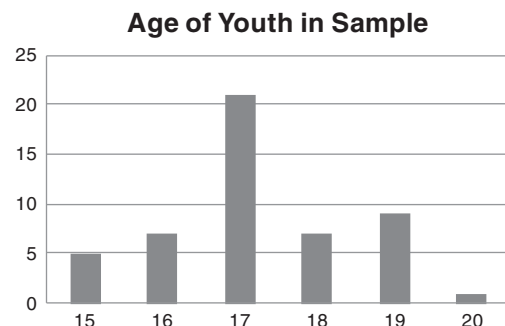


Fig. 1. Age of youth in pilot validation study.

(adults) and the other measured types of support from friends. In this current study, we used only the subscale for caring adults, including both family and non-kin. The SSB instrument was validated in previous studies with young adults that primarily used undergraduates in their sample (Vaux et al., 1987). Data analysis of the test of concurrent validity utilized the Pearson product–moment correlation coefficient between the scores of the YCS and the scores of the SSB.

**5. Results**

The average total score for the YCS at T1 was 52.87 and the average total score at T2 was 52.75 (see Table 1 below). Results of this pilot study indicate high validity and reliability in measuring the relational permanence of youth in out-of-home placement. Results of the test–retest reliability analysis indicated a statistically significant and strong correlation between scores at T1 and scores at T2 ( $r = .88, p < .001$ ).

As illustrated in Table 2 below, each of the subscale scores demonstrated a strong correlation between the first and second testing as well. Subscale scores at T1 and T2 for Section A, which assesses the use of tools for youth engagement in the relational permanence process, were highly correlated ( $r = .86, p < .001$ ). Subscale scores for Section B, which measures the number of supportive connections with caring adults were also highly correlated ( $r = .82, p < .001$ ); along with Section D, which measures the presence or absence of specific types of support ( $r = .82, p < .001$ ). The subscale scores for Section C, measuring the strength of youth connections were moderately correlated ( $r = .72, p < .001$ ); as were the scores for the final Section E, which measures the overall level of youth connectedness ( $r = .77, p < .001$ ).

For the test of concurrent validity, results also indicated a statistically significant and moderately strong correlation ( $r = .74, p < .001$ ), when comparing the *Youth Connections Scale* to the Social Support Behaviors (SSB) Scale.

**6. Discussion**

The findings of the pilot study indicate that the *Youth Connections Scale* demonstrates high validity and reliability. Although further studies are needed with larger samples of youth, the results of this current study suggest that the YCS is a promising new instrument to measure the level of youth connectedness as one component of relational permanence of youth in out-of-home placement. This is particularly significant given the recent focus of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) on social and emotional well-being of youth receiving child welfare service (United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2012).

Since the Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) process began in 2001, state child welfare agencies have been required to assess child welfare policy and practices on several outcome measures related to the safety, permanency and well-being of children and families receiving child welfare services (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Many child welfare scholars and professionals suggest that child welfare agencies have focused primarily on safety and permanency for children and youth, showing significant improvement in many of the CFSR outcomes from the first to second round (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). However, less attention has been paid to the “third leg” of child welfare services – child and youth well-being (Altshuler, 2001).

**Table 1**  
Youth Connections Scale total scores in pilot validation study.

	Minimum score	Maximum score	Mean	Standard deviation
<i>Descriptive data of YCS scores</i>				
YCS – T1	15	83	52.87	16.34
YCS – T2	12	81	52.75	15.94

**Table 2**  
Findings of test–retest reliability of Youth Connections Scale.

Subscales and total	Correlation: between T1 and T2
<i>Test–retest reliability of Youth Connections Scale</i>	
Section A: tools for youth connections	.86*
Section B: number of supportive adult connections	.82*
Section C: strength of youth connections	.72*
Section D: support indicators	.82*
Section E: level of youth connection	.77*
Total score	.88*

\* Statistically significant correlations,  $p < .05$ .

The ACF has adopted a framework of well-being for on-going child welfare practice that includes cognitive functioning, physical health, behavioral/emotional functioning, and social functioning (United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2012). Within the domain of social functioning, research suggests that children and youth in foster care are at risk for decreased relational competence in building and maintaining healthy, supportive relationships later in adulthood (United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2012). Implementing practices that strengthen and measure the relational permanence of youth fits well with the renewed goal to improve the social and emotional well-being of youth in foster care. As demonstrated in the literature, youth benefit from the support of caring adults, particularly as they transition to adulthood (Courtney et al., 2001; Hook & Courtney, 2011). The YCS is a tool that can be used to build on these on-going efforts to build family and other caring adult relationships that can help guide a young person’s emotional development and regulation.

The YCS provides a valid measure of the strength of interpersonal relationships for youth in out-of-home placement. As relational permanence is one key aspect of social and emotional well-being for youth in child welfare services, interpersonal connections also build social capital. Social capital for youth is an interpersonal asset, that youth can draw upon to enhance opportunities in life, and that caring adults may leverage to advance opportunities for success for these youth (Avery & Freundlich, 2009). Findings from studies that examine the role of social capital for youth in out-of-home placement suggest that youth with more social capital have increased chance of employment stability and improved financial outcomes as an adult (Greeson et al., 2009; Hook & Courtney, 2011).

The development and testing of this new measure of connectedness and relational permanence provides child welfare agencies an additional tool to evaluate the work and efforts they are achieving with youth in their care. In addition to the quantitative findings from the tests of validity and reliability of the YCS, qualitative feedback from the participants in the study, including practitioners, youth and the expert panel of reviews, provided important insights for implications in implementing this instrument. The YCS can be used for evaluative purposes, and can also be used as a tool for direct practice and case planning with youth. In the subsequent two sections, implications for implementation of the YCS are outlined, followed by specific modes and methods of utilizing the measure in child welfare organizations.

**6.1. Implications for implementing the YCS**

Using the YCS in an organization provides an opportunity to have intentional and guided discussion about the youths’ perceptions of adults in their lives. Emerging research on practice in this area indicates that most youth experience ambivalence around past relationships with family and other adults as well as mixed feelings about building or rebuilding future healthy relationships (Samuels, 2009; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Many youth also experience feelings of grief and ambiguous loss, which may be difficult for the youth to name and address (Henry, 2005; Samuels, 2009). Based on this literature, the YCS was designed,

developed and tested to be completed by the youth with their social worker, who has hopefully developed a trusting relationship in which youth can safely debrief and dialogue about the potentially difficult and emotionally loaded topic of relational permanency. Additionally, if the youth is completing this scale soon after placement, the YCS may also be effectively used as a tool for developing and building trust, as intentional dialogue on connectedness and relational permanence is guided by the YCS instrument.

The actual process for using the YCS may vary slightly with each youth, based on his or her intellectual and cognitive ability, age and personality, but the instrument is not designed as a checklist for youth to complete. Rather, the YCS is a tool for discussion and dialogue about supportive adults in the youth's life. Qualitative feedback from the participants in the pilot study stressed the importance of the YCS giving youth a voice and opportunity for deeper discussion of the relational elements of permanency. The YCS measures the youths' own perceptions of their connections, and it is recommended that those perceptions be honored in the implementation of the instrument.

The YCS was designed to measure positive and supportive relationships with adults. One consideration in implementing the instrument, is if youth are identifying adults who are not supportive (such as a pimp or an abusive relationship). This provides an opportunity for the practitioner to have deeper discussion about what is meant as a caring and supportive relationship. Even though this instrument helps youth identify and explore positive and supportive relationships, one key role for the worker is to help the youth talk through (not debate or direct the youth) and think about those important relationships that may not be supportive and healthy connections. In using this tool for discussion, the worker can help to normalize the feelings of ambivalence, grief and loss that the youth may be experiencing as he or she thinks about important adults in their lives (Henry, 2005; Samuels, 2009).

Youth with cognitive, developmental, or emotional challenges will likely be able to utilize this instrument. The majority of youth in the pilot study sample were in treatment foster care placements. Although data was not gathered on the specific needs and diagnoses of each youth in the study sample, all youth in the treatment foster care programs were able to complete the instrument with the assistance of their worker.

## 6.2. Modes of implementing the YCS

The Youth Connections Scale is a versatile, reliable instrument that can be used by practitioners, supervisors, administrators, and program evaluators. Several recommendations for implementing this instrument in these various roles are outlined below.

### 6.2.1. Direct practitioners

Research with foster youth has found that many youth do not fully understand the concept of permanency, or have very different perspectives on what that means to them (Samuels, 2009). The YCS is a tool designed to promote intentional dialogue with foster youth around permanency, including relational aspects of permanency. The instrument can be used as a tool by practitioners to guide discussion with youth in foster care about adult connections that may provide on-going support and nurturing to the youth after they leave foster care. If implemented at the time of intake, this instrument can also guide the case planning process and identify areas of strength and challenges related to youth connections to caring adults. Workers can examine the scores for each subsection of the tool to better understand which specific aspects of the youth's level of connections need to be strengthened.

The scale can also help workers better understand the youth's perception of his or her safety net of supportive adults and learn which elements may or may not match with the worker's perception. Precisely because youth and worker perceptions do not always correlate, it is critically important to collaborate with and engage youth in on-going discussion about their relational permanence and level of connectedness (Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007). The YCS can be used

to facilitate discussions with the youth about important adults and re-building connections. One group of foster youth for whom this scale may be particularly helpful is youth transitioning to adulthood.

### 6.2.2. Supervisors

Supervisors may find the *Youth Connections Scale* a useful tool to track the efforts of workers as they assist youth to identify, maintain and strengthen their connections to supportive adults while in care. Research has shown that the role of supervisors is key to achieving desired outcomes in child welfare (Frey et al., 2012). The instrument can be used in both individual and group supervision to discuss specific cases and address challenges that might exist or arise. Tracking the scores of the scale across caseloads can also help supervisors and administrators identify and address areas of strength and areas for growth in the challenging work of increasing the relational permanence of youth in foster care. Supervisors can also use this as a tool in group supervision asking workers to discuss specific challenges and successes they have had in working to identify and build connections with youth.

### 6.2.3. Administrators and quality improvement

The YCS may also be useful for administrators and efforts of quality improvement in child welfare. Current information and data management systems in child welfare can expand to include additional measures of relational permanence. Collecting on-going data using the YCS, can aid in evaluation of practice and in development of measurable performance criteria in child welfare, which are crucial organizational structures for effective child welfare practice (Pecora, 2000). As part of efforts to evaluate practices and strategies to increase the connectedness and relational permanence of youth, the YCS can benefit agencies working towards improved well-being for children and youth in foster care. One example of how to use the Youth Connections Scale as an evaluative tool is to measure the level of connection for youth at time of entry and at time of discharge and to compare the scores to see if the overall level of connectedness has increased, decreased or remained the same. The individual subscales of the tool may also be examined to look at changes in the overall number and strength of adult connections, as well as looking at specific types of support youth perceive and how this changes over time. These data can provide valuable information to child welfare organizations regarding the relational permanence of youth in care.

## 7. Conclusion

Current research indicates the importance of helping youth in foster care connect and re-connect with kin and other significant, caring adults (Ahrens et al., 2011; Collins, 2004; Samuels, 2009). The literature also highlights the risks for youth who age out of care without permanence (Hook & Courtney, 2011). Increased national efforts are underway to improve the social and emotional well-being of youth involved in child welfare services, including: building social capital; strengthening interpersonal skills of youth; preparing youth for healthy relationships, dealing with issues of trauma, grief and loss; and identifying and engaging extended family and other caring adults to create a safety net for all youth. Although youth connectedness is increasingly recognized as important, many child welfare agencies are not yet tracking this data for youth in their care or at the time of discharge. The Youth Connections Scale is a promising new instrument to measure the level of connectedness of youth in out-of-home placement as a component of relational permanence.

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**Appendix A. Youth Connections Scale**

(A) Tools for Youth Connections

	Yes	No
Has a genogram or connectedness map been completed with youth?		
Has a Lifebook been created with or for the youth?		

(B) Number of Supportive Adult Connections: For each category, please write the total number of meaningful relationships that apply for youth at this time. "Meaningful relationships" are defined by the youth. This would include adults who have some on-going contact with the youth and is someone who the youth can count on for some type of support.

	Total Number of Adult Relationships for Each Category
Mother (birth, adoptive, stepmother)	
Father (birth, adoptive, stepfather)	
Adult siblings	
Other adult relatives	
Current foster parent	
Former foster parent	
Current or former social worker	
Current or former teacher	
Current or former therapist, counselor or psychologist	
Pastor, rabbi or other spiritual leader	
An adult friend, mentor or sponsor	
Other adults (Please list relationships):	

(C) Strength of Youth Connections: Indicate the strength of the relationship between the youth and adult right now. In categories where there is more than one person, choose the most meaningful relationship and answer about that person. You can list up to two additional adults in the last two rows. Circle the best response for each row.

Very Weak: No Contact  
Weak: Infrequent contact; Youth can't count on this adult for support  
Moderate: Some contact with this adult but may not be consistent; youth feels a connection but can't count on this adult all the time  
Strong: Contact at least once per month; Youth feels a connection of the heart, mind or spirit with this person; Youth can usually count on this person  
Very Strong: Contact at least once per week; Youth feels a long-term connection of the heart, mind or spirit with this person; Youth can count on this person to be there for them when needed  
N/A: Not applicable because adult is deceased or youth has no siblings

	Very Weak	Weak	Moderate	Strong	Very Strong	N/A
Parent 1 (birth, adoptive or step mother or father)	0	1	2	3	4	N/A
Parent 2 (birth, adoptive or step mother or father)	0	1	2	3	4	N/A
Siblings	0	1	2	3	4	N/A
Other adult relatives	0	1	2	3	4	N/A
Other caring adult identified by youth:	0	1	2	3	4	N/A
Other caring adult identified by youth:	0	1	2	3	4	N/A

(continued on next page)

Appendix A (continued)

(D) Support Indicators: Answer yes or no for each indicator. These do not have to be from the same adult.

You have an adult in your life who you will be able to count on for the following support after you leave foster care:

Yes	No	Indicator
		Providing a home to go to for the holidays
		Providing an emergency place to stay
		Providing cash in times of emergency
		Help with job search assistance or career counseling, or providing a reference for youth
		Help with finding an apartment or co-signing a lease
		Help with school (homework, re-enrolling in school, helpin applying to colleges)
		Assisting with daily living skills, such as cooking, budgeting, paying bills and housecleaning
		Providing storage space during transition times
		Emotional support – a caring adult to talk to
		Sharing in or supporting experiences of youth's cultural and spiritual background
		Checking in on youth regularly – to see how they are doing
		Assisting with medical appointments so youth does not have to experience that alone
		Assisting with finding and accessing community resources.
		A home to go for occasional family meals
		Help providing transportation (help with purchasing a car) or figuring out public transportation
		Someone to send care packages at college
		Assisting with purchasing cell phone and service (for example, youth is added to a family plan).
		A place to do laundry
		Supporting youth in civic engagement such as voting and volunteering

(E) Level of Youth Connections: Indicate your level of agreement with the following statements. Circle the best response.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
While in foster care, you have connected or re-connected with relatives or caring adults who will be lifelong supportive connections	0	1	2	3	4
An adult has made a commitment to provide a permanent, parent-like relationship to you	0	1	2	3	4
You are living with an adult who has or plans to adopt you or become your legal guardian	0	1	2	3	4
You feel very disconnected from any caring adults	0	1	2	3	4

Office Use Only: Youth Name \_\_\_\_\_ Youth Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_  
 Worker Completing Form \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Completion of Form \_\_\_\_\_  
 Form Completed: Within 30 Days of Placement  Within 30 Days of Discharge  Other   
 Form Completed Without Youth at Discharge: Yes  No  If Yes, Explain: \_\_\_\_\_

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