



# Profiles of relational permanence at 22: Variability in parental supports and outcomes among young adults with foster care histories



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## ABSTRACT

Alumni of foster care are at considerable risk for transitioning to adulthood without supportive parental relationships due to significant disruptions of these relationships and histories of maltreatment. This study investigated key dimensions of parental support (care, dependability and financial support) in relationships with birth parents and parental figures among young adults who received foster care and exited to diverse permanency outcomes. Using Latent Class Analysis, four groups were identified indicating young adults who had (a) connections to both birth parents and parental figures; (b) minimal connections; (c) some connection to parental figure; and (d) some connection to birth parent. Young adults who reported connections with both birth parents and parental figures reported better outcomes, while those who reported minimal connections had least optimal outcomes. An examination of antecedent characteristics indicated a modest role of legal permanence. Results here highlight a need for inclusive child welfare practices that honor the family fluidity that foster youth experience and privilege relationship quality over legal permanence, particularly for older youth in foster care. Greater methodological rigor in the assessment and study of relational permanence and its potential to offset risks among maltreated youth in foster care is called for.

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## 1. Introduction

Early adulthood is a critical time in development as youth encounter challenges requiring greater autonomy and independence, yet still need emotional and financial support from parents. Relationships with parents involving warmth, dependability and support have inherent value and have been demonstrated to confer benefits to offspring across the lifespan. Alumni of foster care have typically encountered disturbance and disruption in parental relationships at critical points in development, raising important questions regarding their access to, and quality of, parental supports during early adulthood. Child welfare practice and policy has long recognized the value of “permanence” in parental figures, however, researchers have started examining “relational permanence” as a meaningful way to understand important but often overlooked qualities of relationships between foster youth and their parental figures (Samuels, 2008; Semanchin Jones & LaLiberte, 2013). This study uses relational permanence as a conceptual

frame to examine the diversity of relationships alumni of foster care may have with parental figures in multiple dimensions, and the potential importance of these relationships in providing support during young adulthood.

### 1.1. Parental support in early adulthood

Among youth without histories of foster care, the critical importance of parental support during adolescence and young adulthood has been demonstrated in multiple domains. As adolescents and young adults face the developmental task of relinquishing dependency on parents, establishing autonomy and forming unique identities (Arnett, 2001), relationships with parents may seem to diminish in salience. However, the continued need and desire to depend on parents (or a parent figure) facilitates healthy adjustment in early adulthood (Aquilino, 2006; Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Hill & Holmbeck, 1986; Ryan & Lynch, 1989). Qualities of parenting relationships including availability, warmth, support and involvement, typically of long duration, impact multiple domains of young adult functioning ranging from overall well-being and self-esteem to interpersonal competence in establishing quality relationships (Berzonsky, 2004; Kenny & Sirin, 2006; Masten et al., 2004; Powers, Hauser, & Kilner, 1989; Smits et al., 2008; Tubman & Lerner, 1994; Van Wei, Bogt, & Raaijmakers, 2002). The ability to successfully navigate increasing independence during emerging adulthood requires the capacity to trust, and form mutually

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caring and supportive relationships through interpersonal webs and networks of interdependence (Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003).

Financial support has also become a normative component of parental relationships during the transition to adulthood, particularly within middle- to upper-class families (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005; Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005). Providing direct financial assistance, or a place to live in the family residence, entails extending parental investments to promote the educational and employment opportunities of offspring, and to provide a buffer when young adults face financial challenges.

Young adults without family ties, or whose families are financially constrained, may be at a relative disadvantage in terms of financial supports. Among racial-ethnic minority families, cultural norms may further shape lower rates of leaving home or the timing or value of establishing financial independence (DeMarco & Berzin, 2008; Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005).

### 1.2. Threats and opportunities for relational permanence among foster youth

In this paper, relational permanence is defined as a mutually committed, life-long family connection to an adult parent-figure; a central feature of a child's social ecology necessary for healthy development. It is also a concept that values one's phenomenological experience of a relationship as an enduring source of love, care, support, dependability, belonging and mutual trust (Samuels, 2008). Consequently, relational permanence is independent from the legality or genetics of a family tie; though ideally it would be present within all family relationships. Research on young adults with foster care histories indicate substantial reasons to be concerned regarding their opportunities and abilities to experience and maintain relational permanence with parental figures. First, the experience of maltreatment and trauma presents a source of vulnerability and can threaten the development of social, emotional and relational competencies through multiple pathways. Maltreatment has an impact on cognitive, affective, behavioral and relational functioning through neurophysiological adaptations which extend across the life course (Briere & Scott, 2006; Coates, 2010; Draper et al., 2008; Lansford et al., 2002). Exposed to early trauma, the developing brain can be impaired in its capacity to modulate stress (Kendall-Tackett, 2002; McCrory, De Brito, & Viding, 2011; Teicher, 2002), to engage in effective problem-solving or processing language and emotional stimuli (Choi, Jeong, Rohan, Polcari, & Teicher, 2009). It can impair one's ability for executive function and regulation of behavior (Teicher et al., 2003). Children who are maltreated early in life often develop a sensitized neurobiology such that relatively minor interpersonal threats can elicit strong negative behavioral and physiological reactions (Dozier & Rutter, 2008). Maltreatment also challenges one's emerging ability to trust relationships with caregivers, impairing accurate social cognition and one's capacities for empathy (Cicchetti & Curtis, 2005; Dodge, Pettit, Bates, & Valente, 1995; Milan & Pinderhughes, 2000).

Removing children from a context of maltreatment can be essential to provide a safe haven for healing, recovery, and healthier development. Yet removing children from their parents can also be experienced as traumatic and disruptive. Even children who are abused or neglected often form strong bonds to their parents (Moriceau & Sullivan, 2005) and will endure considerable stress during separation. A host of factors unique to foster care placement can also exacerbate or create added complexities and risks to a maltreated child's relational development. Such complexities can include having to navigate the ambiguous loss of homes, parents, and uncertainty in one's sense of belonging, trust, and family identity (Samuels, 2009). Experiencing these losses and relational disruptions across one's life can leave lasting impressions on children's expectations of current and future relationships, particularly toward adults and parent figures, as dependable or trustworthy sources of care and support.

While in care, substituting "new" homes and parent figures creates both opportunities and challenges to relational health (Lawrence, Carlson, & Egeland, 2006). Living within multiple family systems can expose youth to a wider pool of supports, diversity in family life, and expand their social networks. It can offer children opportunities to access corrective relational experiences in the context of a foster family or more permanently, within adoptive families. However, sometimes youth report feeling a sense of mixed-loyalties to more than one family system or to more than one parental figure (Samuels, 2008); strong connections to birth families (or a desire for such ties) can persist regardless of a youth's permanent plan (Collins, Paris, & Ward, 2008). Youth may worry that they, or the parental figures in their lives, will experience a dual-family connection or expression of attachment as betrayals, positioning one family tie against the other (Fahlberg, 1991). These realities can complicate a child's desires and openness to adoption (Samuels, 2009). Left unresolved, this can also cut youth off from accessing multiple sources of supports and forming multifamily identities—a potential strength and gain of having experienced one's childhood in more than one family system (Samuels, 2009).

Best practices in child welfare include pursuing legal permanence through adoption or reunification in the hopes that this also provides children with relational permanence—access to a dependable and trustworthy source of care and support across the life course. The amelioration of the impact of maltreatment on some developmental domains has been reported among youth who experience nurturing adoptive families or stable, high quality caregiving environments in homes of foster parents rather than institutions (Sheridan, Fox, Zeanah, McLaughlin, & Nelson, 2012). Yet, even when adopted, youth may not fully catch up to their non-maltreated peers (Van Ijzendoorn & Juffer, 2006), or experience legal permanence as a trusted source of relational permanence (Samuels, 2008).

Simultaneous mistrust and desire for relational permanence is particularly characteristic among older youth in foster care and youth transitioning to adulthood from foster care who did not achieve legal permanence. Research increasingly suggests that both maltreatment and foster care can negatively contribute to early adult outcomes, and disrupt relational networks of support in significant ways (Anda et al., 2006; Kerman, Wildfire, & Barth, 2002; Perry, 2006). Studies of youth aging out of foster care reveal such accumulated vulnerability, and report increased risk of poor outcomes including criminal involvement, substance abuse and mental health problems as well as the reduced likelihood of achieving competence in domains of education, employment and community involvement (Courtney et al., 2005; Kerman et al., 2002; Pecora et al., 2006).

Therefore, one major developmental challenge for foster youth in early adulthood includes learning to negotiate their own capacities and comfort for interdependence and independence in the context of complex and often disrupted family histories involving birth parent(s) and other potential parental figures (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). These distinct experiences of family and parents suggest diversity in how they might experience care, dependability and support in these relationships during early adulthood.

### 1.3. Gaps in the study of foster youth and the concept of relational permanence

This study seeks to address gaps in the study of relational permanence and is unique in several ways. First, focusing not only on the access to and use of parental supports, but also on the *qualities* of these relationships, contributes to a deeper understanding of this source of support in early adulthood. Previous studies of social support and foster youth have clearly indicated that youth (including emancipated youth) do have connections that are important to them, and highlight the centrality of biological family even for those who were not reunified (Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010; Munson & McMillen, 2009). However, less is known about the quality of the relationships they maintain in

adulthood specifically with non-biological parent figures. Even more rare are investigations into the role of these adults (potentially in combination with biological parents) in facilitating a sense of belonging, emotional security, and care—more central elements to relational permanence. Additionally, extending beyond solely evaluating tangible types of support (e.g., financial, housing, childcare) to include emotional and relational supports of parent figures (e.g., feeling liked and cared for, sense of belonging, dependability) this study hopes to advance the consideration of a fuller range of supports and a broader relational scope inclusive of both birth parents and other parent figures as important in the lives of young adults.

Second, there is significant heterogeneity in the foster care population both within (Keller, Cusick, & Courtney, 2007) and across the permanent outcomes of adoption, reunification, subsidized guardianship, and emancipation. In considering this inherent complexity and diversity, some have called for a “person-oriented” approach over the variable-oriented analyses that often dominate this field (Bergman & Magnusson, 1997; Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2010; Magnusson, 1995, 1998). Variable-oriented research measures a single status or experience (e.g., permanent outcomes) to better understand its association with other valued outcomes (e.g., educational achievement, housing, or avoiding incarceration). While this approach is important, it may be less useful for understanding interacting factors that shape observed outcomes and can mask the presence of diversity even within groups with shared characteristics. Alternatively, a person-oriented approach contextualizes the analysis of outcomes within myriad interacting factors, and assumes significant heterogeneity even within populations that share a status or key set of characteristics. In short, person-oriented approaches (Magnusson, 1998) reject a one-size-fits all approach.

The study of relational permanence is largely informed by person-oriented approaches, specifically exploring the diverse meaning of permanence and family support among youth in care and as young adults (Collins et al., 2010; Samuels, 2008, 2009; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Yet, the exploration of relational permanence has been restricted by the tendency to focus solely on a single population: young adults aging out of foster care. This study of relational permanence seeks to engage both a person-oriented approach, but also expand beyond a single permanency sub-population. This study design raises questions for the design of future research regarding the degree to which legal permanency outcomes promote the achievement of relational permanence, or shape the quality of relationships this population experiences with parent figures into adulthood.

Finally, this study recognizes the potential for multiple parental relationships simultaneously. Youth in foster care, by definition, experience more than one parent figure. Indeed, the essential qualities of one relationship may derive meaning and significance from the presence or absence of other parental relationships. For example, youths' disconnections from birth parents or assessments of their birth parents as (un)reliable sources of certain types of support or care, can potentially shape a child's need or willingness to form new relationships with substitute parental figures for that support or care. The current investigation examines the presence of multiple parent figures, and essential dimensions of these relationships, as potential sources of relational permanence.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Sample and procedures

These data were collected as part of a larger investigation of how maltreatment histories, individual characteristics, experiences in foster care, services and family relationships impede or support young adults who have been in foster care in transitioning to adulthood. The analyses here focus on the role of relational permanence and availability of financial support from parents and parental figures as potentially central in supporting adaptation during emerging adulthood. The

sample was drawn from a specialized foster care program serving older youth with histories involving multiple failed foster home placements and residential treatment who were poor candidates for permanency through reunification or adoption. However, youth in care received long-term foster care services tailored to meet their unique needs resulting in many actually exiting with legal permanence.

Youth who had spent a year of more in foster care with this agency were invited to participate in interviews at the ages of 19, 22 and 25. Record reviews were also completed upon case closure. Data collection was conducted by individuals with advanced degrees in social work or related human services fields and were trained and supervised. Interviews were conducted in-person at a location convenient for the interviewee and interviewer (most often at the young adult's residence). This analysis is based on interviews conducted when youth were 22 years of age, and includes youth who were adopted, reunified, and who aged out of foster care.

At age 19, 304 youth were eligible to participate in interviews and 242 were interviewed (response rate = 80%). When data collection on the project ended, 47 young adults who were interviewed at 19 were not yet old enough to be interviewed at age 22 and 5 were ineligible due to incarceration. Of 190 eligible for repeated interviews at age 22, 160 participated. The sample at 22 included 84% of young adults who participated at age 19 and 64% of young adults eligible to participate at age 19. A comparison of this sample with all those who were eligible at 19 but not included at 22 indicated no significant differences in age at initial out of home placement, gender, stability in care, type of substantiated maltreatment, or permanency status at exit. At the time of Wave 2 interviews, young adults ranged in ages from 21.4 to 23.4 with a mean of 22.2 (SD = .33). Youth who exited to guardianship (N = 7) were excluded from the analyses presented here because there were too few to draw conclusions regarding their experiences. Females comprised 52.3% (N = 81) of the sample. Sixty-three percent were Caucasian (N = 96); 14% were African American (N = 22); 13% were Biracial (N = 20); 8% were Hispanic (N = 12); and 2% were of other racial backgrounds.

Young adults had been initially placed in foster care at age 6.1 (SD = 3.7) and were 18.5 (SD = 3.7) at exit. On average, they had spent 6.5 years (SD = 3.4) in the specialized foster care program from which this sample was drawn. Criteria for entry into the program included special needs defined as older age, poor prospects for permanence through reunification or adoption, and a history of residential placement or failed foster care placement.

### 2.2. Use of a multidimensional method

Using Latent Class Analysis (LCA), groups of young adults who are distinct in relational profiles were identified. LCA utilizes an iterative maximum likelihood procedure to model variance among measured variables as indicators of a latent categorical variable that delineates subgroups or “classes” of individuals within a sample (Collins & Lanza, 2010). Classes are relatively homogeneous within, yet distinguished from, other groups by a profile of responses to each variable in the model. Estimated models may produce a number of classes and the final model is chosen based on how well the model fits the data, as well as its interpretability. Goodness of fit statistics is used to evaluate the derived model's representation of the data and to help the researcher determine the number of classes which yield the best model. The likelihood ratio chi-square  $G^2$  compares the model predicted and observed data, with a significant difference indicating that the derived model is not a good representation. The parsimony indices Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) compares model solutions with different numbers of classes. A bootstrapping procedure is also recommended to evaluate the extent to which the addition of a class significantly improves model fit. The analyses presented here were conducted using MPlus (Muthén & Muthén, 2011).

An exploration of differences in developmental antecedents and concurrent adaptation was then conducted to better understand groups with distinct relational permanence profiles. Analyses examined antecedents that child welfare practitioners typically target in hopes of offsetting the impact of maltreatment and disrupted relationships with birth parents and to provide opportunities for lasting supportive relationships. These variables include legal permanence, stability of placement, continuity of relationships with non-biological parental figures, and types of maltreatment. Measures of current competence and vulnerability were chosen to capture achievement of stage-salient developmental tasks in the domains of education, employment, and overall measures of adjustment.

### 2.3. Data analysis plan

Classification variables for LCA were selected on relational dimensions expected to capture the qualities of relationships with parents and parental figures associated with positive adaptation during early adulthood. These included the presence of a dependable relationship involving an expectation of enduring availability; the quality of care and involvement in current interactions and the provision of financial assistance. Profiles were then examined in light of a set of hypothesized antecedent variables. These included severity earlier post-trauma adjustment and child welfare experiences expected to influence the establishment of relationships with parental figures including legal permanence, stability of placement, and placement in institutional settings. Measures likely reflecting both youth's experiences and developed capacities for relationships with parents and parental figures were also examined including the perception of having been cared for or having felt a sense of belonging within a family while in care, having had a relationship with a parental figure during care that is still in place, and self-reported attachment styles. Profiles were also examined in relation to outcomes in key developmental domains during young adulthood including mental health, substance abuse, involvement with the legal system, employment, homelessness and self-report of financial well-being.

### 2.4. Measurement of classification variables

The presence of a *dependable relationship with a birth parent* that was considered dependable and expected to endure was measured via the question "Is your birth (mother/father) someone that you can always count on to be there for you when you need someone and that you expect will continue to be there for you in the years to come?" Young adults who answered affirmatively to this question regarding one or both birth parents were coded "Yes" and those who answered no regarding both birth mother and father were coded "No." The presence of a *dependable relationship with a parental figure* was measured by asking young adults, "Is there anyone in your life who is not your birth parent, but that is like a parent to you, someone that you can always count on to be there for you when you need someone and that you expect will continue to be there for you in the years to come?" Young adults who answered affirmatively to this question regarding one or more parental figure were coded "Yes" and those who did not were coded "No."

The presence of a *caring relationship with a birth parent* and the presence of a *caring relationship with a parental figure* were measured using a composite of three questions asked of each relationship. "Thinking about your recent contact with xx [name of parent/parent figure], please tell me if this describes xx often (4), sometimes (3), rarely (2) or never (1). A. Likes you and enjoys spending time with you, B. Gets angry and argues with you (reverse scored), C. Helps you with advice or assistance when you want to solve a problem or get something done." If more than one birth parent or parental figure was identified, the maximum score was used. Scores equal or above the median for

the sample were coded "Yes" for the presence of a caring relationship with a birth parent or a caring relationship with a parental figure.

Receipt of *financial support* from birth parents or birth family was indicated by a question, "Have you received financial support from any of the following persons in the past 12 months?" with probes for birth parents, birth relatives, former foster parents, former/current adoptive parents, friends, and others. Positive endorsement of financial support from birth family or birth relatives was coded as financial support from birth family. Young adults were also asked the extent to which the person they identified as a parental figure has provided financial help. Positive endorsement of financial support from a non-birth parent in the past year in addition to a response indicating that the specific parental figure identified was someone who had provided financial support at some point in time was coded as indicating financial support received from a parental figure.

The presence of *any contact with birth parents* in the past year was also included to capture the availability of birth parents for relationships, given that the nature of problems that led to child welfare involvement could have led to separations from youth of an enduring nature. This variable distinguishes absence from other measured qualities of the relationship that were coded as present or absent. A sustained lack of availability is distinct from lack of dependability, care or financial support in otherwise existing relationships.

### 2.5. Measurement of antecedent experiences and perceptions of relationships

Data concerning antecedents were measured with a standardized record review protocol. *Early trauma* was assessed based on extraction of data indicating substantiation of types of maltreatment including physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. *Emotional and behavioral symptoms* in foster care were measured by a total count of internalizing symptoms including symptoms of anxiety and depression, and externalizing symptoms including symptoms of oppositional behavior. *Educational risk* reflects extraction of data indicating that the youth received special education services or repeated a grade in school.

*Stability in care* was measured first by summing the total number of families young adults had been placed with during care. In order to account for differences in length of foster care stays, a second variable was calculated by dividing total number of families by years in care to obtain a measure of families per year. Finally, stability in care was measured via whether young adults had experienced one or more moves to an institutional setting: group home, psychiatric hospital or residential treatment center.

*Legal permanence* was measured by record reviews indicating status at case closure. For those who left care prior to the age of 18, updated legal permanence status was obtained during interviews for those who had left the agency prior to age 18. Permanence outcomes included for this analysis were adoption, reunification, and aging out of foster care.

### 2.6. Measurement of relationships

In order to measure young adults' experiences of relationships with parental figures while in foster care they were asked to identify someone who was not a birth parent, but most like a parent while growing up in foster care and answer questions about their recollection of these relationships. Perceptions of *belonging to a family* while in foster care were measured using the Belonging and Emotional Security Tool (Frey, Cushing, Freundlich, & Brenner, 2008). The youth version of this measure includes 23 items designed to capture the perception of emotional security and belonging by foster youth in foster families. Example items include "Makes me feel like I belong to the family," "Cares deeply about what happens to me."

Perceptions of *care* in relation to parenting figures while growing up in foster care were measured using the Care scale from the Parental Bonding Instrument (Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979). This 25 item

questionnaire asked respondents to rate the extent to which a series of descriptions capturing care and overprotection described their caregiver on a four point scale from “Very like” to “Very unlike.” Examples from the Care scale include, “Spoke to me in a warm and friendly voice,” “Enjoyed talking things over with me.”

The presence of an *enduring parental figure* was indicated when young adults named the same person when asked to identify “a person who was most like a parent to you while growing up in foster care” and when asked to name “someone now who is not your birth parent, but that is like a parent to you, someone that you can always count on to be there for you when you need someone and that you expect will continue to be there for you in the years to come.” This measure identifies those youth for whom a present relationship with a parental figure has been a relationship they could count on of lasting duration.

Young adults’ perceptions of themselves in relationships with others were measured using The Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). The Relationship Questionnaire consists of four short paragraphs describing each *attachment style*: secure, insecure-dismissive, insecure-avoidant, and insecure-preoccupied. Individuals were asked to choose the attachment style that best described them, and to rate the degree to which they resemble each of the four attachment styles on a 7-point scale. Participants were classified according to their self-reported attachment style: *Secure* indicating comfort in close relationships; *Insecure-avoidant* indicating a discomfort based on perceptions of others as not trustworthy; *Insecure-dismissive* indicating discomfort in relationships involving an exaggerated sense of self-sufficiency; and *Insecure-preoccupied* indicating a discomfort in relationships due to perceptions of likely rejection.

#### 2.7. Measurement of current adjustment: Competence

A composite score of *competence at 22* was calculated by summing indicators reflecting functioning at age appropriate levels in the domains of personal finance, constructive use of time, education and community involvement. In the area of personal finance, young adults were asked whether their income from work was currently covering their bills and expenses. Constructive use of time was measured via the report of either working or currently in school, and community engagement was measured by reporting that they are currently registered to vote, have volunteered in the past year, or have attended religious services.

#### 2.8. Measurement of current adjustment: Vulnerability

A composite score of *vulnerability at age 22* was measured by summing indicators of problems in the domains of mental health problems, substance abuse, homelessness, arrest and low educational attainment. Mental health problems were measured using Symptom Checklist 90 (SCL-90-R; Derogatis, 1994). The SCL-90-R is a 90-item standardized instrument designed to measure current symptom severity. This measure provides a reliable estimate of the likelihood of being diagnosed with a mental health disorder (T score above 63 for the Global Severity Index for any two symptom dimensions). Risk for substance abuse was measured using a summed score of items asked during the interview: use of marijuana in past month, lifetime use of hard drugs, current worry about use of alcohol or drugs, use of alcohol or drugs currently causing problems, binge drinking in past 30 days, and use of alcohol on 10 or more days in past month. Endorsing 2 or more items signaled risk for substance abuse. Arrest and homelessness in the past year, and low educational attainment were measured via questions during interviews. Young adults who at age 22 reported not yet having graduated high school were considered to have low educational attainment. A composite index of *overall adjustment* reflecting both levels of competence and vulnerability was calculated by subtracting the vulnerability composite score from the competence composite score.

### 3. Theory

We use the construct of “relational permanence” to refer broadly to the experience of feeling cared for, having a sense of belonging to, being able to depend on, and having the expectation of an enduring relationship with parents or parental figures (Samuels, 2008; Semanchin Jones & LaLiberte, 2013). Encompassing aspects of attachment theory, relational permanence highlights the importance of one’s access to a parent-figure who is present in meaningful ways over one’s life course. Building on previous work, this study theorizes the normative developmental experience of parental relationships among foster youth as likely characterized by relational impermanence and interpersonal maltreatment, but ideally includes positive multifamily/multi-parent experiences. Birth parents may have been inconsistently available or dependable, or may have been sources of harm, and alternative caregivers may also introduce added instability, vary in quality, and may inconsistently be available or trustworthy sources of care (or even sources of harm). Yet youth likely have positive feelings, experiences, and memories attached to these same relationships and their experiences within multiple families. Therefore, while meaningful parental figures in their adult lives could be birth parents, they may likely include others who have been present during their childhoods in ways that are important to them in adulthood. Engaging a focus on relational permanence, rather than legal permanence, recognizes the complexity of foster youths’ unique histories of family and parent-figures, and subsequent adaptations to familial fluidity over time.

### 4. Results

Descriptive statistics for variables included in the model are presented in Table 1.

#### 4.1. Model selection and case assignment

Table 2 presents model fit statistics for LCA model solutions creating between one and five classes. Model fit statistics indicate that at least three classes are needed to provide a good fit to the data, as models with two or fewer classes resulted in significant likelihood ratio statistic  $G^2$  values indicating the model and data were significantly different. The bootstrapped parametric likelihood method indicated that the addition

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics for variables in the model.

Variable	%
<i>Birth parent relationship</i>	
Contact in past year	
No	25
Yes	75
Dependable	
No	71
Yes	29
Caring	
No	44
Yes	56
Financial support	
No	73
Yes	27
<i>Parental figure relationship</i>	
Dependable	
No	25
Yes	75
Caring	
No	42
Yes	58
Financial support	
No	54
Yes	46

**Table 2**  
Goodness of fit statistics for latent class models with 1–5 classes.

	G <sup>2</sup>	Df	P value	AIC	BIC	Bootstrap P value
1 class	335.2	120	.00	1354.2	1375.4	
2 classes	185.4	112	.00	1220.4	1265.8	.00
3 classes	85.8	104	.90	1136.8	1206.5	.00
4 classes	38.8	96	1.0	1105.7	1199.7	.00
5 classes	22.5	88	1.0	1105.4	1223.6	.00

of each class resulted in a significantly better fit of the data than the model with fewer classes. The choice of model employed a balance of similarity between the model and the data and parsimony. Both Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) values are helpful tools for comparing models because they both impose a penalty on G<sup>2</sup> as a function of the number of parameters estimated in the model and BIC also imposes a penalty for sample size. A smaller value represents a more optimal balance of model fit and parsimony. As shown in Table 1, the five class model resulted in the greatest similarity between the model and the data. However, greater parsimony, as indicated by Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) values is evident in models with 3 and 4 classes. The four class model provided an optimal balance of model fit and parsimony.

#### 4.2. Description of classes

Each individual case was assigned to a class based on the calculated posterior probability of membership in each class. Results of the four class model derived from LCA are presented in Table 3 illustrating the probability of each response category for variables within each class.

*Latent class 1.* The young adults in this class were those who reported current connections with both birth parent and parental figures. Less than half indicated that they had a birth parent who they could count on and expected would be there for them in the years to come, and only a third indicated they had received financial support from a birth parent or relative in the past year. However, almost all reported that they perceived a caring relationship with their birth

parent—that he or she likes them and enjoys spending time with them. All reported recent contact. Relationships with parental figures were more likely to involve dependability and financial support in addition to care.

*Latent class 2.* The young adults in this group reported little connection with either a birth parent or parental figure. Although a substantial minority indicated recent contact with one or more birth parent, none indicated their relationships with birth parents were dependable or caring, and very few reported receiving financial support. Similarly, young adults in this group showed no evidence of meaningful connections with parental figures; none reported having relationships with parental figures that were dependable, caring or involved financial support.

*Latent class 3.* The young adults in this class were those who reported current relationships with parental figures. Although a substantial minority reported recent contact with a birth parent, none reported that their relationships with birth parents were dependable, caring, or financially supportive. In contrast, relationships with parental figures were reported to be dependable and for the majority of young adults in this group, these relationships were experienced as caring. Receipt of financial support from parental figures was common among this group.

*Latent class 4.* The young adults in this class were those who reported current connections with birth parents. All the young adults in this group reported being in recent contact with birth parents and that their relationships were considered caring. Dependability and financial support was characteristic of their relationships to a lesser extent, with slightly more than half indicating that they could depend on a birth parent now and for years to come. Half reported financial support from birth parents. This group was markedly exclusive in reporting no meaningful connections with parental figures for care, dependability or financial support.

#### 4.3. Antecedents and perceptions of family and relationships among classes

Examination of differences in antecedent experiences among classes indicated that Class 2 was most frequently at a disadvantage (Table 4). Young adults in this class were those with the greatest frequency of substantiated sexual abuse and had the highest level of internalizing symptoms while in care. They also had the highest total number of different family placements and were more likely than others to have spent time in group care. Their perceptions of family relationships were also significantly less likely to involve an enduring parental figure, a recollection of a caring parental figure or a perception of feeling a sense of belonging within a family while in care. Young adults in Class 4 were also significantly less likely to report an enduring parental figure and a perception of family belonging while in care. However, this may be due, in part, to stronger connections to birth family, rather than lacking family belonging overall.

#### 4.4. Vulnerability and competence among classes

As shown in Table 5, an examination of differences in competence and vulnerability among classes indicated that those in Class 1 were reporting higher levels of competence at 22, whereas those in Class 2 were reporting higher levels of vulnerability. When both competence and vulnerability were used to measure overall adjustment, both Classes 1 and 3 were at an advantage relative to Class 2. Advantages among those in Class 1 were greater likelihood of covering bills and expenses through working and being involved in either working or pursuit of education at 22. Disadvantages among those in Class 2 were a greater likelihood of substance abuse risk, mental health diagnosis, and arrest.

**Table 3**  
Results of Latent Class Analysis.

	Class 1: Both	Class 2: Minimal	Class 3: Parental figure	Class 4: Birth parent
	N = 63	N = 17	N = 49	N = 24
<i>Birth parent relationship</i>				
Contact in past year				
No	0	.59	.64	0
Yes	1.0	.41	.36	1.0
Dependable				
No	.54	1.0	1.0	.40
Yes	.46	0	0	.60
Caring				
No	.08	1.0	1.0	0
Yes	.92	0	0	1.0
Financial support				
No	.70	.88	.84	.49
Yes	.30	.12	.16	.51
<i>Parental figure relationship</i>				
Dependable				
No	0	1.0	0	.93
Yes	1.0	0	1.0	.07
Caring				
No	.16	1.0	.27	1.0
Yes	.84	0	.73	0
Financial support				
No	.36	1.0	.38	1.0
Yes	.64	0	.62	0

**Table 4**

Antecedent experiences and perceptions of family relationships.

	Class 1: Both N = 63	Class 2: Minimal N = 17	Class 3: Parental figure N = 49	Class 4: Birth parent N = 24	F test statistic	Significant contrast
<i>Early trauma</i>						
Physical abuse	.33	.29	.37	.39	.2	
Sexual abuse	.14	.53	.22	.22	4.1**	2 > 1,3,
Neglect	.54	.65	.76	.74	2.2+	
<i>Early adjustment</i>						
Internalizing symptoms	3.2	4.8	3.6	3.0	3.7*	2 > 1,4
Externalizing symptoms	8.0	10.4	7.9	8.4	1.7	
Educational risk	.67	.94	.78	.83	2.3+	
<i>Child welfare experience</i>						
Total family placements	4.3	5.8	4.7	4.3	2.5+	2 > 1
Families per year	.45	.45	.44	.46	.03	
Institutional placement	.59	.88	.51	.63	2.5+	2 > 1
<i>Legal permanence</i>						
Reunification	.22	.00	.04	.25	4.4**	1 > 3
Adoption	.10	.12	.29	.04	3.8*	3 > 1,4
None	.69	.88	.67	.71	.9	
<i>Perception of relationship</i>						
Enduring parental figure	.63	.00	.73	.08	23.4***	1,3 > 4,2
Caring parental figure	17.7	15.2	17.5	16.4	4.5**	1,3 > 2
Belonging & emotional security	99.5	65.1	96.2	80.0	11.0***	1,3 > 2,4
<i>Attachment</i>						
Secure	.38	.12	.35	.46	1.9	
Insecure–avoidant	.17	.47	.33	.21	2.7*	
Insecure–resistant	.10	.12	.10	.08	.1	
Insecure–dismissive	.30	.24	.14	.25	1.3	

+p &lt; .10; \*p &lt; .05; \*\*p &lt; .01; \*\*\*p &lt; .001.

#### 4.5. Limitations

Several limitations concerning the available sample and measures bear note. The sample here includes youth referred for specialized foster care due to older age, severity of emotional and behavioral problems and poor prospects for legal permanence. Unlike many children who enter placement for brief periods, these young people spent several years in foster care and had permanent plans to remain in foster care for the long term. Therefore, results here do not likely generalize to all foster youth, but most represent the experiences of the older foster youth population in care. Measurement of relationships consisted only of reports from young adults. While these are important perspectives, as noted above, future research must include the perspectives of others in these relationships, namely birth parents, foster parents, adoptive parents and other parental figures. Sample attrition resulted in the exclusion of a substantial proportion of eligible young adults from participation in this study, and the absence of youth who exited to guardianship further limit the extent to which findings generalize to all young adults exiting care.

#### 5. Discussion

Results here indicated diverse profiles of relationships with parents and parenting figures among alumni of foster care. The largest group (Class 1) reported important relationships with both birth parents and parental figures whereas others were more exclusively relating to either birth parents (Class 4) or parental figures (Class 3) and still others reported minimal relationships with either birth parents or parental figures (Class 2).

While the relative size of the classes may be dependent on the specific sample examined, the relationship profiles of the classes nonetheless reflect salient differences in antecedents and outcomes. Young adults who reported connections with both birth parents and parental figures (Class 1) showed relatively high levels of competence and low vulnerability in young adulthood relative to the other groups. Both Class 1 and Class 3 similarly reported the presence of a consistently caring and dependable parental figure and experiences of family belonging in care which may have conferred substantial benefits in development. Yet individuals in Class 3 were not markedly different from those in

**Table 5**

Competence and vulnerability at 22.

	1	2	3	4	F statistic	Significant Contrast
Competence composite	3.8	2.7	3.3	3.0	4.0**	1 > 2
Income from work covers bills/expenses	.61	.25	.45		2.6+	1 > 2
Either working or in school	.94	.82	.86	.71	2.7*	1 > 4
Enrolled in post-secondary education	.67	.41	.59	.50	1.5	
Volunteered in community	.46	.41	.43	.54	.3	
Registered to vote	.62	.53	.53	.46	.7	
Church attendance	.49	.18	.37	.25	2.8*	
Vulnerability composite	1.1	2.1	1.3	1.6	3.6**	2 > 1
Mental health diagnosis	.35	.75	.59	.42	3.9**	2 > 1
Substance abuse risk	.25	.53	.22	.29	2.1+	
Homelessness	.16	.29	.18	.29	.9	
Arrest	.29	.65	.20	.46	4.9**	2 > 1,3
Low education	.03	.06	.12	.13	.2	
Overall adjustment	2.5	.12	1.5	1.3	6.3***	1,3 > 2

+p &lt; .10; \*p &lt; .05; \*\*p &lt; .01; \*\*\*p &lt; .001.

other groups in their adaptation. Those in Class 1 were distinguished from Class 3 in reporting a relationship with a birth parent in addition to a relationship with a parental figure. The importance of a relationship with a birth parent, even for young adults who have dependable, caring and financially supportive relationships with parental figures is implicated here. Having both a supportive relationship with a birth parent and a relationship with a parental figure seemed to confer an advantage over having one source of parental relationship. Even when youth no longer live with their biological parents, some birth parents can serve as unique sources of care and support around relational permanence. It has been well documented that many youth often search for birth parents, siblings, return to extended biological family members after aging out of care, or consider birth family connections to be among their primary sources of identification and attachment (Jones & Kruk, 2005; Samuels, 2008). This finding suggests that those who are able to access multiple sources of support and care are also those who are more capable of achieving positive outcomes and evading vulnerability. This reinforces findings from Perry (2006) that suggests multiple sources of support from heterogeneous networks promote resilience in foster youth. What remains unclear is if these young adults, as children, already had strong relational capacities or had access to more stable sources of support early on and therefore, were better positioned to take advantage of these relationships later in life. It may also be possible that through inclusive practices that engage both foster families and birth families in the process of meeting youth's needs, these young adults were supported in remaining connected to more than one source of parental support.

Young adults in Class 2 had minimal connections to parents and parental figures and were those most vulnerable in early adulthood. Young adults in this group were those most at risk based on type of early trauma and experiences in child welfare of multiple placements. As young adults, they were also least likely to have access to emotional and financial supports from birth parents or parental figures. Perhaps not surprisingly, these young adults are also most vulnerable and least competent in meeting the stage-salient developmental tasks of completing or furthering their education, gaining employment and becoming involved in their communities as they transition to adulthood.

Legal permanence was a distinguishing feature of some classes. Young adults who experienced reunification were more likely members of Classes 1 and 4, adoptees were most likely members of Class 3. Yet the role of legal permanence was quite modest, as the majority of young adults in all classes, including those with supportive parental relationships from multiple sources (Class 1), were neither adopted nor reunified. This suggests the need to assist all youth in having supportive and caring relationships with birth or adoptive parents as well as other parental figures despite their permanency outcomes. The relational exclusivity of Class 3, most of whom were adopted and reported little connection to birth parents, and Class 4, most of whom were reunified and reported no care or financial support from a parental figure, also raises the potential importance of understanding that legal permanence practices may cut youth off from multiple family supports. While often providing and/or solidifying family relationships, legal permanence can also present obstacles to relational continuity outside the legally permanent family system. Loyalty to legally permanent family members, caregiver choices, or practice approaches that disconnect youth from more than one family relationship, may further hinder the continuity of connections with important relationships.

The findings here complicate our understanding of legal permanence and its direct influence on relationships with birth parents and parental figures among children with severe emotional and behavioral problems placed in foster care at older ages. Legal permanence was neither necessary nor sufficient alone in determining whether young adults were connected to birth parents or parental figures during young adulthood. Yet positive perceptions of parenting figures, the sense of belonging to a family while in care and consistency of parental

figures over time significantly distinguished groups who were connected from those who were not.

### 5.1. Implications for practice

In an effort to ensure that youth do not “age out” without dependable family supports, caseworkers often seek relationships and services for youth that are likely to ensure they have a supportive adult in their lives as they transition to adulthood. This focus on connecting youth to supportive relationships was strengthened by the Fostering Connections Act of 1999, which permitted states to access Title IV-E monies to extend services to youth up to age 21, and fund a range of supports during their transitions to adulthood. Results here indicate that simply assessing a child's legal permanence, the presence of any “supportive adult,” or measuring the frequency of contact with a parent-like figure is of quite limited value in understanding relational permanence. Only those young adults with marked impairments on multiple measures of competence and vulnerability failed to report the presence of a supportive adult relationship that was expected to endure, and 40% of these were in recent contact with a birth parent. Simplistic measures of connection will likely identify only the very least connected from the rest, and are probably not useful as a threshold of adequate relational support for child welfare practice.

These findings underscore that practice must focus on the qualities of the relationships youth have with families—the relational dimensions of permanence—not solely on achieving legal permanence. Moreover, legal permanence is distinct from the quality of that relationship as a source of care, or experience of belonging or dependability—critical dimensions of parent–child and family relationships in fostering well-being that can be easily overlooked in child welfare practice (Bamba & Haight, 2007). This study's findings compliment recommendations made in the literature to track more relational aspects of working toward permanence with children and families in child welfare practice (Lenz-Rashid, 2009; Semanchin Jones & LaLiberte, 2013) and to attend to elements of parental relationships that are (or can be supported in becoming) healing and growth fostering (Miller & Stiver, 1997; Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott, & Tracy, 2010; Samuels, 2008).

This study cannot speak specifically to why some young adults had meaningful bonds or lacked substantive connections at 22, but results suggest plausible pathways. Dual sources of parental support were probably not available to all youth due to choices made by birth parents or parental figures or because exclusive practices have preferred one family relationship (biological, foster, or adoptive) while marginalizing or ignoring others. Youth who have been members of more than one family may feel caught in the middle, similar to children of divorcing parents, and perhaps have chosen one family over the other to reduce ongoing emotional distress (Cummings & Davies, 2002; Cummings, Schermerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2006; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). It was somewhat surprising that the largest group here, and those with best outcomes, had substantive relationships with both birth parents and parental figures. These young adults may have had greater capacities early on to develop these relationships, or may have found that relating to multiple sources, rather than one exclusively, was a more comfortable way of managing relational needs and attachments within complex family structures and circumstances.

Recent developments in the field are attempting to engage practices that are inclusive of diverse family networks and relationships to provide multiple sources of support for youth without divisiveness or expectations of exclusivity that can be detrimental to child well-being. Such practices include the Lifelong Families Model (LFM) which involves bringing all adult relationships in foster youth's lives together in supporting them not only through the transition to permanent families, but throughout their lifetimes (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012). The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family model (North American Council on Adoptable Children 2005). (Fiester, 2008) incorporates early meetings including birth families, foster families, case

workers and supervisors to collaborate in supporting the child's adjustment and facilitating reunification or permanency planning. In a similar vein, the practice of open adoption has allowed youth who cannot return home to birth parents, to continue relationships with birth parents and other biological family members. Although this practice does not remove the sense of loss entirely, it allows youth to remain connected to their biological origins, and also to those who may represent important family ties across adulthood. The benefits of this described in previous research include a greater sense of adoption satisfaction and critical support to identity work across the life course (Berge, Mendenhall, Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006; Grotevant et al., 2007; Siegel, 2008).

### 5.2. Implications for future research

This study raises many questions and challenges for exploring relationships and well-being among foster youth in general, and for the concept of relational permanence with parent-figures in particular. First, findings from this analysis suggest that one's source of parentally derived care, dependability and financial support may come from more than one parent figure. All of these benefits (as well as others) are important dimensions of family membership, particularly during critical transitional periods. Research designs must be inclusive of multifamily ties, and allow for fluidity in how parent-like relationships are accessed, navigated, and maintained among this population. This study did not explore other potentially defining elements of positive parental ties (e.g., identity, authenticity, self-esteem). These benefits may also be derived from parent-figures with whom someone may or may not have lived during early childhood. Future research should explore more deeply the many contributions adults, particularly those within youth's daily natural environments, may offer that enrich and critically contribute to youth's development by providing love, care, a sense of being known, and modeling trust (Munson et al., 2010). There is also significant room for new lines of research that more deeply explore diverse experiences of parent-figures and "family," and normative trajectories of socio-emotional health and well-being among this population.

Future research and conceptualizations of "social support" from parental figures must also extend beyond the traditional domains of supportive behaviors used to measure these relationships in research (i.e., technical, instrumental, informational, emotional, companionship) to include one's sense of attachment, trust, care, and belonging. Our measures must also not conflate the provision or receipt of tangible supports with the provision or receipt of love, emotional care, or as a measure of a person's relational health. For example a parent may not be willing or able to provide financial or other tangible supports but may be someone's primary source of family identity, care, and belonging; a parent-figure can also provide money without the presence of love. In using measures that included tangible supports (e.g., financial assistance) but also included accessing a parental source of care and belonging, this study's findings suggest that some key relationships retain importance even if they are not dependable sources of tangible supports. This study joins others (Greeson & Bowen, 2008; Munson et al., 2010) in calling for the study of relationships as valuable assets in and of themselves. Simply obtaining a sense of family belonging and care can be important elements of parental relationships across anyone's life course, but particularly important for assessing and measuring the relational health and networks of persons with foster care histories. This also suggests the need to use more multidimensional and phenomenological measures of relationships with parental figures (and potentially others) for understanding how youths' relational health and relationship quality potentially promote or inhibit other key outcomes of interest including employment, education, early pregnancy, crime, mental health and physical health.

Second, the concept of relational permanence has sometimes been considered a replacement for legal permanence or as an acceptable

alternative goal when legal permanence is unlikely. The findings from this analysis suggest otherwise. Rather, relational permanence as defined by emotionally secure, bonded, and caring relationships that are believed to endure over time, is an ideal element of any parent-child relationship (legal or otherwise) and should be thought of as independent from, but not a substitute for, legal permanence. However, more research is needed to understand the potentially distinct processes of establishing a sense of belonging, love and emotional security in varied contexts adoption, guardianship, aging out of foster care, and even relative care and reunification (Bellamy, 2008). How do foster youth returning to, or adopted within, their biological families heal from intrafamilial abuse and/or neglect in order to (re)establish trust, care, belonging and emotional security and safety for all members? Research is needed to understand and ensure that youth have the opportunity not only to return home, but also to heal from past traumas and have ongoing supportive relationships that can help them succeed.

Existing studies also provide evidence that foster parents' and case-workers' levels of attunement and sensitivity to these issues can assist youth in developing a sense of parental figures as a secure base that promotes positive adaptation (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Frey et al., 2008; Schofield, 2002). Further research is needed to explore how parental figures, birth parents, and others might support youth in accessing and maintaining relational permanence from varied sources, and what attachment processes promote and inhibit its formation among youth with diverse relational histories. Such knowledge could be immensely helpful for enhancing more positive outcomes among all youth in foster care.

Finally, future studies would benefit from a more relational approach to the study and measurement of "relational permanence" and social support in general, by the perspectives of all involved. How biological parents, foster parents, and other parent-figures experience these relationships, the challenges and rewards of enduring ties, and the lessons learned from lost connections, are too frequently missing voices and insights from our scientific understandings of foster care experiences. Future designs must expand to be inclusive of more than one informant's perspective on relationships and family. Studies must also make use of multiple methods to study, longitudinally, the unfolding of these relationships and their potential in offsetting risks facing maltreated youth with foster care histories. The identification of these mechanisms is crucial in developing practices and policies that enhance the long-term relational capacities of youth, in promoting the ability of parental figures to provide essential dimensions of relational support, and in evaluating the quality of child welfare practice. Results here suggest that youth will do better if practice conceives of family and parental supports as multidimensional, and inclusive of multiple parties. Even when one parental figure provides on several dimensions, the contribution of another parental figure can make an important difference.

This study provided a snapshot of elements of relational permanence and early adulthood functioning at 22. There is a great need to understand, more deeply, how our child welfare practices launch young people with relationships that will endure in ways that include feeling genuine care and belonging, and enhance their lives beyond early adulthood.

## 6. Conclusions

This study was unique in providing insights from alumni of foster care on their experience of relational permanence and access to multiple dimensions of parental support during young adulthood across diverse permanency outcomes. The importance of relationships with birth parents is further established here, even among those who do have relationships with parental figures involving dependability, care and financial support. Findings sound a cautionary note to a sole focus on legal permanence in the context of relationships with birth parents or parental figures, particularly when youth in care are older or face

emotional and behavioral challenges. Flexibility and diversity in the parental networks youth may need to construct should be informed in part by the dependability and capacity of the adults involved to provide a sense of belonging, continuity, and authentic emotional care. Exclusivity in relating to either birth parents or parental figures may not necessarily be best in fostering health and well-being for many youth into adulthood. Young adults who were able to access multiple sources for different dimensions of parental support were those showing more success in transitioning to adulthood with competence and more likely to evade most areas of vulnerability. Practices and policies that support the use of multiple parental supports inclusive of biological, foster, and other parental figures are needed. Foster youth already face challenges based on histories of maltreatment and the familial disruption that comes with removal from home and subsequent moves in and out of foster families and group homes. Drawing support from multiple parental figures, attunement to issues of healing and recovery necessary for relational and familial health, and using models of practice that honor the familial fluidity that these youth experience, could provide crucial assistance in building optimal relationships that support their well-being as they transition into adulthood and across the life course.

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