

## **Who has the authority to define "permanency?"**

### **By Lisa Dickson**

#### How the System Defines Permanency

A recent round table of experts, convened by Casey Family Services and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, defined permanency as:

“Having an enduring family relationship that:

- is safe and meant to last a lifetime
- offers the legal rights and social status of full family membership
- provides for all levels of a young person’s development
- assures lifelong connections to extended family, siblings, other significant adults, family history and traditions, race and ethnicity, culture, religion and language.”

These are lofty goals. It’s almost as if a group of people who emerged from a “normal” family looked at everything that they personally had, and said, “Yes, we want foster care youth to have that.” So, they set that as the standard, after taking upon themselves the responsibility to define what that standard is...

Is it realistic? Is it attainable? Not from my personal experience. As a former foster care youth, I found my first “family” in my peers while living in a college dorm. But I did not have the legal rights of full family membership until I was married in 2001.

#### How Youth Define Permanency

It's important to note that young people in foster care define permanency very differently. When the Urban Institute and the California Youth Connection facilitated focus groups of foster youth to ask them about this issue:

- Some youth referred to permanency as a physical or concrete entity. They said things like: “Staying in one place” and “Not having to move” and “A place to stay until you age out.”
- Other young people said, “No, it’s more than a place to live. It’s a feeling of connection.” They defined permanency as an emotional commitment from other people.

One young man described the concept of permanency as being like a permanent marker; he said, “If you draw on the paper, that mark ain’t going nowhere. The paper may go somewhere or it could be picked up, but the mark ain’t going nowhere.”

That is a great visual. Think about the people who have made an indelible mark upon your life. Not all of them were connected to you by blood, birth or legal contract.

### Whose Permanency Is It, Anyway?

Now, I am going to suggest something radical here... I believe that the “experts” and the “professionals” should allow the input of foster care youth and alumni to influence how they measure success in the area of permanency.

What do youth say about adoption, guardianship, reunification with their biological family, independent living programs and aging out of foster care?

During a youth panel at the 2006 Casey It's My Life conference:

- 1.) Young people differentiated between biological or legal family, and chosen family
- 2.) Youth said that they needed an entire network of connections, and not just one person
- 3.) Young people didn't want to be viewed as a "failure" if they aged out of the system without being adopted
- 4.) Teenagers in foster care expressed their need for independence and independent living skills

There Is No “One-Size-Fits-All” Approach To Foster Care The experiences of young people differ according to the situation. Some find happiness through reuniting with their biological families. Others report being taken advantage of by ‘predatory parents.’

Here are some legitimate fears that young people in foster care express:

1. “Do you just want to close my case, or am I really safe now?” Many young people fear becoming a ‘closed case.’ The rate of re-entry into the foster care system after an initial attempt at reunification is high.
2. “Aren’t I too old for adoption?” Teenagers in United States foster care report that they have learned from past experience that most foster parents are not eager to take teenagers into their homes. They also report their fears that, by being adopted, they might lose access to independent living classes, college tuition assistance and medical insurance.
3. “Why should I take the risk of adoption by a stranger?” One of the horrors of foster care is its unpredictability. Teenagers who have grown up in the system often know what to expect from independent living programs. They anticipate having some power and control over their personal living situation.

Young people interviewed by the Urban Institute said that when they were placed in a group home or foster home, they had opportunities to leave if they did not like it – but “once you are adopted, you are stuck.”

### Broadening Our Definition of Permanency

We live in a pluralistic society, where the word 'family' can be defined in many ways. Perhaps the definition of permanency from that roundtable was more than just lofty... maybe it was limiting, too.

I would ask the experts: "Is it a nuclear family that we are trying to accomplish, and is anything less a failure? Are we engaging in partisan politics? Or are we trying to lay a foundation that will lead to lifelong emotional resiliency?"

Foster care alumni often report finding their first experience of "permanency" through friendships and mentoring relationships. A FosterClub intern from Michigan reported finding permanency through her involvement with the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, which she described as being an 'emotional parent' in her life.

The way I see it, the choice is simple: We can keep defining what permanency should look like for a young person and forcing it upon them. Or we can listen to the young people themselves.

Because for a researcher, this is an outcome. For a staff person, this might be a job performance issue. But for a young person in foster care, this is their life.

#### SOURCES:

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