Promoting Supportive, Lasting Adult Connections for Older Youth in Foster Care

Good Shepherd Services' Permanency Pact Program

Summary

This report is informed by emerging research and lessons learned from child welfare practice that permanency, including relational permanency, can positively impact a young person's life trajectory, ultimately improving his or her well-being and educational outcomes. In 2016, over 20,000 youth aged out of foster care in the United States.[1] These youth are at a higher risk for poor outcomes compared to youth who find permanency.[2] For this population, effective programmatic interventions are required. We highlight one program model called Permanency Pacts, which can increase relational permanency by strengthening and formalizing existing relationships between a youth and his or her relatives or other close adults. This paper provides an overview of the importance of relational permanency and existing efforts to support older youth transitioning to adulthood, with a deeper look at the Permanency Pact Program at Good Shepherd Services and its integration with the Solution-Based Casework model. Though further research is required, early program findings are promising and show an improved sense of connectedness for participants post-program.

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Context and Background

The Challenge: Youth Who Age Out Alone Face Poorer Outcomes

Child development experts agree that youth need loving, dependable adult relationships to support their healthy development. Research shows that the quality and consistency of a child's relationships with adults is critical to healthy brain development, and that these relationships lay the foundation for academic achievement, mental health and social-emotional skills in the future.[3] Emerging research further recognizes adolescence as a period of rapid brain development when the presence of a caring adult can counteract the effects of trauma, even trauma dating back to early childhood experiences.[4]

For many youth in foster care, positive adult relationships are disrupted or absent. The child welfare system's ostensible objective when children are removed from their homes is to ensure their safety and well-being as they move toward permanency, whether by reunification with their family of origin, placement with relatives, or placement with a new permanent family. Yet all too often, older youth in care leave the system without strong connections to dependable adults, and at higher rates than younger children.[5] "Aging out" of the system is frequently synonymous with a lack of formal, meaningful connections to adults. The results can be bleak, involving a high level of instability in housing, education, employment, and wellness. Foster youth who age out of care are more likely to become homeless, be diagnosed with mental health disorders, suffer from substance abuse, and become involved in the juvenile justice system.[6]

Despite these trends, several studies have shown that older youth in care who are connected to a supportive adult experience better well-being, stronger protective factors, and engage in fewer risk-taking behaviors.[7] A recent study also found improved educational outcomes and financial self-sufficiency in a sample of former foster youth who had supportive connections with both birth parents and parent-like figures. Conversely, former youth in care with fewer connections to non-relative supportive adults had more negative outcomes.[8]
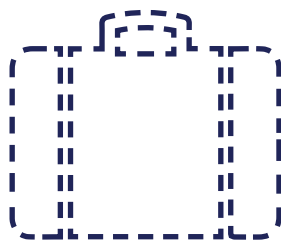
FIGURE 1: OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH WHO AGE OUT OF CARE
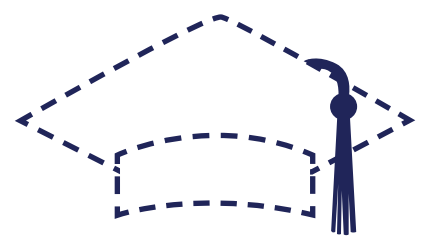

25-50%
Housing

Studies estimate that **25 to 50 percent** of youth are precariously housed after exiting care.[9]

47-69%
Unemployment

The unemployment rate for young people aging out of foster care is **47 to 69 percent**, depending on age and gender.[10]

40-63%
Education

According to studies in various states, **40 to 63 percent** of youth who age out of foster care do not complete high school.[11]

These preliminary studies into the impact of relational permanence have promising implications for child welfare practitioners interested in developing programmatic interventions to connect youth in care with loving adults. If legal permanency is not achieved through reunification, KinGAP or adoption for young adults, the system should continue to support well-being and educational outcomes by pursuing relational permanency.

The Context: Priorities for Older Youth in New York City

For older youth who have been in care for several years, permanency efforts are often de-emphasized by the system. Particularly when children turn 16, the focus has historically shifted towards preparing youth with the skills needed to live independently, while neglecting to attend to the social and emotional well-being associated with family-connectedness.

In NYC, this effort is encapsulated in the Preparing Youth for Adulthood (PYA) program created by New York City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) in 2006. This program augments the transition plan required for youth aging out of care by New York State's Office of Children and Family Services. One component of the program is to find a "permanent adult connection" for every youth leaving the system. Despite the critical importance of such a connection, many youth age out without a responsible, caring adult upon whom they can rely. Absent a dedicated program model and staff focused on achieving this goal, agencies struggle to connect youth with dedicated adults committed to providing a permanent emotional lifeline.

A number of foster care agencies in NYC have recognized the insufficient emphasis on older youth permanency and connectedness. For example, Graham Windham, Children's Village, and Heartshare St. Vincent's have developed family finding, coaching, and mentoring programs to develop more adult connections. However, ensuring these connections are durable, life-long and permanent remains a challenge.

Permanency Pacts for Lifelong, Kin-like Relationships

Developed by FosterClub,[i] a Permanency Pact supports lifelong, kin-like connections between a youth and supportive adult. A Permanency Pact is intended to provide structure and a safety net for the youth, a defined commitment by both parties to a long-term supportive relationship, and clarity regarding the expectations of the relationship. It is a pledge by a kin-like adult to provide specific types of support to a young person in or aging out of foster care.

Simply put, a Permanency Pact connects a young person to a caring adult in a formalized way. For young people who are unable to return home to their biological parents and for whom adoption has not been vigorously pursued, Permanency Pacts offer an opportunity for ongoing support. Pacts should be developed for all children in foster care 16 years and older who are likely to age out of foster care, and ideally, a youth will have more than one Permanency Pact.

A central component of the pact is a pledge made by an adult to provide specific types of support to a young person in foster care. Ideas for how an adult can support a youth are outlined in FosterClub's list of 45 suggested supports.[12] The suggested supports range from offering child care to providing a home for the holidays. For example, the committed adult may not be able to provide housing or financial support, but s/he can be there to celebrate achievements, offer a place to do laundry, or accompany the youth to medical appointments. These caring adults can provide emotional as well as tangible support that young adults need.

FIGURE 2: SAMPLE OF FOSTERCLUB'S LIST OF 45 SUGGESTED SUPPORTS

FosterClub compiled a list of 45 suggested supports that an adult could provide for youth transitioning out of care. A more complete list can be found in their toolkit Permanency Pact: Life-long, Kin Like Connections Between a Youth and Supportive Adult.

- ☐ **A home for a holiday**
- ☐ **A place to do laundry**
- ☐ **Care packages at college**
- ☐ **Confidant for problems or concerns**
- ☐ **Job search assistance**
- ☐ **Transportation**
- ☐ **Help moving**

- ☐ **Help with legal troubles**
- ☐ **Help finding community resources**
- ☐ **Emergency place to stay**
- ☐ **Storage of personal belongings**
- ☐ **Spiritual support**
- ☐ **Child Care**
- ☐ **Drug and alcohol addiction support**

The process for developing a Permanency Pact is often initiated by a case worker. It involves identifying interested "supportive adults" and connecting them to an interested youth. Together, they sign a pledge. Due to the formal involvement of an agency, both parties enter the relationship with clear expectations and boundaries.

FIGURE 3: WHO IS INVOLVED IN DEVELOPING A PERMANENCY PACT?

Youth
- ☐ Recognizes the need for lifelong, supportive adults
- ☐ Identifies meaningful adults in her/his life, with the help of the facilitator
- ☐ Develops understanding of her/his future needs where an adult can provide support
- ☐ Fosters a strong relationship with the supportive adult

Facilitator
- ☐ Knowledgeable in facilitating Permanency Pacts
- ☐ Assists the youth in identifying potential supportive adults for Permanency Pacts
- ☐ Provides insight into the general needs of youth transitioning out of foster care
- ☐ Works to strengthen the relationship between the youth and supportive adult

Supportive Adult
- ☐ Has a relationship with the youth
- ☐ Willing to commit to a lifelong relationship with the youth
- ☐ Positive role model
- ☐ Able to provide the youth with the specific support s/he needs on an ongoing basis

Operationalizing the Permanency Pact Program: NYC Good Shepherd Services

Building on its agency-wide youth and family development approach and long-standing commitment to ensuring that youth in care have a wide network of support and strong ties to family, Good Shepherd Services (GSS) introduced a Permanency Pact Program in 2015. The goal of the program is to connect every young person age 16 and older with a caring adult who is committed to providing support while in foster care and after discharge. GSS implemented Permanency Pacts by integrating it with their existing Solution-Based Casework (SBC) Practice model.

This program guide will describe the following key components of GSS's program implementation:

1. Integration into Solution-Based Casework Practice model
2. Hiring of a Youth Development & Permanency Pact Coordinator
3. Ongoing training and support for supportive adults and agency staff
4. Measurement and assessment with the Youth Connections Scale

1   **Integrating Permanency Pacts into the Solution-Based Casework Practice Model**

The Solution-Based Casework (SBC) Practice model provided a well-aligned practice framework for implementing the Permanency Pact Program. SBC is an evidence-based practice model that prioritizes partnership with families, pragmatic solutions to difficult situations, and the celebration of change. Staff are dedicated to deepening connections between family members and leveraging their strengths to develop skills for success.

The SBC method involves:
- Building a partnership with families
- Identifying patterns of everyday life that directly relate to what led to placement in foster care
- Developing clear outcomes and action plans
- Measuring behavior change and celebrating successes

SBC targets specific daily events in the life of a family that have caused difficulty. By providing a common conceptual map for case planners, supervisors, and treatment providers, SBC helps focus the family's efforts on clear and agreed-upon outcomes. Through partnership, consensus-building and a shared language, the practice model helps individuals identify patterns of maltreatment as well as their strengths, and develop risk-reduction and prevention plans to ensure future safety.

GSS staff identified a gap in the strategies available to support older youth who are likely to age out. With the Permanency Pact Program, staff now integrate its elements within the SBC milestones, as described in Figure 4.

FIGURE 4: INTEGRATING PERMANENCY PACTS INTO SOLUTION-BASED CASEWORK

SBC PRACTICES	APPLICATION TO PERMANENCY PACT PROGRAM
GENOGRAM	In addition to family, identify meaningful adults
TRACKING THE SEQUENCE	Identify areas of additional support during the exploration of recent challenges
SEARCHING FOR EXCEPTIONS	Identify adults who supported moments of success, showing the value of supportive adults
CHILD WELL-BEING OUTCOMES	Identify well-being needs (i.e. medical appointments) that a supportive adult could facilitate
DEVELOPING PLANS WITH FAMILIES	Include a supportive adult in the action plan
HELPING FAMILIES SHARE THEIR PLANS	The Action Plans can be shared and jointly prepared with the supportive adult
CELEBRATING PROGRESS	Include the supportive adult in celebrating progress

2 Staffing: Youth Development & Permanency Coordinator

The GSS Permanency Pact program began in March 2015 with the creation of a new position in the Foster Care, Juvenile Justice and Support Housing (FJS) division. The Youth Development and Permanency Coordinator (YDPC) works to ensure that young people discharged from foster care leave with a network of formal and informal supports that will assist them in successfully navigating the transition to adulthood and beyond. The YDPC helps young people identify and engage adults whom they already know. This position helps deepen relationships, assists youth to identify their needs upon leaving foster care, and facilitates Permanency Pacts between young people and adults.

GSS's work focuses on seamlessly integrating the Permanency Pact tool into all facets of case planning, discharge planning, trainings and other foster care initiatives.

FIGURE 5: KEY FUNCTIONS OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT & PERMANENCY COORDINATOR

Host Workshops

Incorporate Permanency Pact information, awareness and training into monthly Preparing Youth for Adulthood workshops for young people age 13 – 20 years old.

Train & Mentor Program Staff

Train staff in the family foster care, therapeutic family foster care, and residential care programs on the importance of Permanency Pacts and how to assist youth in identifying and engaging potential adults.

Identify & Connect

Identify meaningful adults in a youth's life, make connections, and provide support to foster these relationships and deepen existing bonds, increasingly in partnership with the youth's case planner.

Host Mentoring Groups

Ensure mentoring groups with mentors and caring adults are held to introduce and connect youth to potential supportive individuals.

Measure Progress

Interview youth with signed Permanency Pacts at the time of discharge and after discharge (at 6 months and one year) using the Permanency Pact Checklist and Post-Discharge interview questions to measure progress made regarding housing, education, employment, and level of system-involvement.

Assess at Intake & Discharge

Assess youth upon intake, during their time in foster care, and after discharge (at 6 months and one year) using the Youth Connections Scale and Permanency Pact Checklist to determine how connected they feel to adults in their life.

3   **Ensuring Strong, Meaningful Relationships through Training and Support**

Recognizing that Permanency Pacts are a new concept for each participant in the program – the youth, caring adults, and staff, Good Shepherd Services provides training and support at various points in the process. Additionally, GSS believes the youth and supportive adults benefit from a more formalized understanding of each other's perspectives and life experiences. In the initial launch of the program, youth advocates and staff from You Gotta Believe![ii] led workshops to encourage youth and their supportive adults to understand through a trauma-informed lens the expectations, pitfalls, and responsibilities around building and sustaining the kinship-like relationship that a Permanency Pact promotes.

Now, GSS incorporates permanency-focused activities and conversation into the monthly young adult group workshops. These groups are often co-facilitated by young people formerly in foster care. Sharing one's experiences after leaving care provides the basis for group discussion on the importance of caring adults in their lives. GSS also offers dedicated group and individual trainings on Permanency Pacts on a consistent basis for supportive adults and staff.

To promote bonding between the youth and supportive adults, the agency hosts recreational and cultural activities at external venues. For example, youth and supportive adults are invited to the theater (offered by Culture for One)[iii], Radio City Christmas Spectacular and the movies. Supportive adults and youth are also informed about free or low-cost local recreational events and activities in GSS's monthly youth newsletter. These organized activities provide bonding opportunities early on in developing a Pact, and in building the foundation for the growth of a natural relationship.

ii   You Gotta Believe! is a New York City-based organization dedicated to the recruitment of lifetime parents for older youth in foster care.

iii   Culture for One works in collaboration with foster care agencies in New York City to provide youth with artistic, musical, and theatrical experiences.

④ Ongoing Assessment

Good Shepherd Services evaluates the success of the program with two tools, the Youth Connections Scale (YCS)[13] and a Permanency Pact Checklist [14] created by GSS. Both tools are administered at key points in the youth's involvement: at intake, one year after intake, at discharge, six months post-discharge, and one-year post-discharge.

The Youth Connections Scale is a tool used to capture the child's perception of her/his level of connectedness and the strength of emotional, financial and social safety nets.[iv] The total score represents a combination of the number of supportive adult connections in the youth's life, the strength of those adult connections, and the amount of support the youth feels s/he has. Using the YCS, the facilitator involved with a child's Permanency Pact (e.g. the caseworker or YDPC) can identify the challenges that a child faces or get them access to resources s/he needs.

FIGURE 6: USES FOR YOUTH CONNECTIONS SCALE

Used to facilitate discussions with the youth about important adults and rebuilding connections.

Guides the case planning process and helps to identify areas of strength and challenges related to youth connections to caring adults.

Allows agency supervisors to track the efforts of workers as they assist youth to identify, maintain and strengthen their connections to supportive adults while in care.

Can be used as part of efforts to evaluate practices and strategies to increase the relational permanence of youth.

Good Shepherd Services tracks Youth Connections Scale data collected at 6-month intervals from the youth to understand their levels of connectedness. Additionally, GSS tracks well-being indicators related to education, housing, employment and system-involvement and compares improvements or declines in each measure with the YCS data.

Good Shepherd Services also created a Permanency Pact Checklist to gather information about a youth's current educational and employment status, along with their housing situation, involvement in the criminal justice system, and overall success. The checklist enables the Permanency Pact facilitator to define well-being benchmarks and assess progress over time.

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iv The Youth Connections Scale was developed to fill a current gap in the field to measure and evaluate increased efforts to identify and strengthen supportive connections.

Early Program Findings

Overall, youth with Permanency Pacts showed improved connectedness and well-being. From October 2015 through November 2017, there were 73 foster care youth at GSS that completed the Youth Connections Scale and Permanency Pact Checklist. Of those 73 youth, 38 (52 percent) had signed Permanency Pacts with a supportive adult. Their data show that young people who signed Permanency Pacts consistently reported a higher level of connectedness with adults in their lives compared to those who did not sign a pact. There were 10 young people discharged from foster care who completed at least three assessments from intake to post-discharge. All ten of these youth reported an increase in the overall level of connectedness with supportive adults in their lives (in one case, up to 32.6 percent improvement). While the data is preliminary, GSS continues to build and improve upon their Permanency Pact program with increased awareness, trainings, workshops, mentoring, recruitment and assessments among foster care youth and supportive adults.

Conclusion

While further research is required to fully understand the impact of Permanency Pacts on young adult outcomes, research and practice support the conclusion that foster care agencies can effectively increase relational permanency by focusing additional attention and support on fostering strong adult connections for youth likely to age out of foster care.

The experiences of youth participating in Good Shepherd's Permanency Pact Program demonstrate the potential for similar programs to positively impact young people's sense of belonging and connectedness, thereby providing them with a support network post-discharge from foster care and, ultimately, improving their chances for stability and success.

Endnotes

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About the Redlich Horwitz Foundation

The Redlich Horwitz Foundation believes that every child who enters foster care should be placed with a family, and that every family who opens its home to a foster child should be well-supported, well-resourced, knowledgeable about the challenges ahead, and prepared to provide the love and stability essential to healthy outcomes for children.

We work to increase and improve family-based care and to reduce time to permanency for all children in the foster care system in NY. We accelerate change by partnering with county and state leaders, nonprofits, foundations, and grassroots advocates for foster youth. We seek to improve practice and policy in support of reducing residential placements, including kin-first placement protocols, targeted recruitment and improved support of foster families, community-based services for children and families, and other strategies proven to expedite the path to permanency.

To that end, we support and work collaboratively with service providers, policy advocates, government agencies, and foster youth to implement thoughtful, data-driven policies and programs directed toward ensuring that every child exits the foster care system into a permanent, loving family and promoting more efficient and effective practices and policies across the systems that impact children and youth in foster care.

About Good Shepherd Services

Good Shepherd Services envisions a New York City where children grow up in thriving neighborhoods, and all individuals and families can build on their strengths to realize their fullest potential.

Good Shepherd Services goes where children, youth, and families face the greatest challenges and builds on their strengths to help them gain skills for success. We provide quality, effective services that deepen connections between family members, within schools, and among neighbors. We work closely with community leaders to advocate, both locally and nationally, on behalf of our participants to make New York City a better place to live and work.

Good Shepherd Services leads in the development of innovative programs that make a difference in the lives of children, youth and families today.