

Promoting Permanency for Older Youth in Out-of-Home Care

Although achieving safety, well-being, and permanency for children and youth is the overarching goal of child welfare practice, older youth don't achieve permanency at the same rate as younger children. Meaningful, enduring relationships with supportive adults can improve opportunities and outcomes related to education, employment, income, housing, mental health, and more (Salazar et al., 2018). It should remain a priority for all young people involved with child welfare, but especially for older youth, who are more likely to linger in out-of-home care and transition to independence without permanency.

The path toward permanency can be nuanced and challenging, and each young person's journey is unique. Nurturing supportive relationships should begin the moment a child becomes involved with child welfare, and the process must be anchored in family and community. It includes prioritizing placement

with kin, helping youth maintain important connections with their families of origin, and identifying kin with whom they are not already connected. The process should also be youth-driven, with professionals

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authentically partnering with youth and having conversations about what permanency means to them.

This bulletin provides information for child welfare professionals about the importance of permanency—in its many forms—and strategies for achieving it.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FOCUSING ON PERMANENCY FOR YOUTH

For many individuals, adolescence and young adulthood are periods of extensive developmental growth that occur in the context of a stable family environment. Youth in foster care, however, may not have the same family or social connections to support them as they develop independence, establish educational or vocational goals, adopt a personal values system, mature into adulthood, and explore their identities. Family relationships provide stability and lifelong support to youth that can buffer the effects of previous trauma. Both **legal permanency** and **relational permanency** are particularly important for older youth. Legal permanency includes reunification, adoption, and guardianship. [Relational permanency](#) encompasses lifelong connections with adults who, regardless of their legal caregiving status, continue to support young people beyond their time in out-of-home care.

Annual data reported in the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) track how youth exit care, including exits to reunification, adoption, guardianship, and emancipation, which is also called "aging out" or transitioning to independence without legal permanency. In fiscal year (FY) 2021, 9 percent of children who left foster care were emancipated (Children's Bureau, 2022). Older youth have an increased likelihood of

exiting care without permanency. In FY21, more than half (52 percent) of young people ages 16 to 21 who exited foster care exited via emancipation (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023).

Young people who emancipate from care often experience adverse outcomes in education, employment, income, housing, relationships, and mental health (Bendeck & Moore, 2022). Among young people between the ages of 19 and 21 who age out of foster care, nearly one-third experience homelessness, one in five are incarcerated, and nearly one in four become parents (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022). Not only do youth who age out of foster care face more adverse outcomes compared to peers in the general population, they also experience poorer outcomes in education, employment, housing, health, criminality, and substance use compared with youth who exit foster care to adoption (Lindner & Hanlon, 2024). These many stressors, often including poverty and mental health challenges, are risk factors for child maltreatment (Austin et al. 2020), meaning these young people's children are at increased risk of entering the child welfare system, perpetuating a cycle of intergenerational child welfare involvement.

With so many youth exiting care without legal permanency, establishing relational permanency is essential for improving outcomes (Administration for Children and Families [ACF], 2021). Professionals can facilitate pathways to supportive relationships by helping youth maintain strong connections with relatives and fictive kin—people who are not related by blood or marriage but are considered family members—and helping kin access the resources they need to support youth.

FEDERAL LEGISLATION SUPPORTING YOUTH PERMANENCY

The Federal focus on achieving permanency and securing connections for youth prior to their emancipation has led to the enactment of various related provisions in Federal legislation, outlined below.

The [Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008](#) (Fostering Connections Act) contains several provisions that help establish and strengthen youth permanency, including the following:

- Requiring title IV-E agencies to identify and notify all adult relatives within 30 days of the removal of their option to become a placement resource for the child
- Creating a new plan option for States and Tribes to provide kinship guardianship assistance payments under title IV-E on behalf of children who have been in foster care and have a relative who is taking legal guardianship
- Allowing youth who leave foster care for kinship guardianship or adoption after age 16 to receive services under the [John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood](#) (Chafee program)—a comprehensive program designed to assist youth and young adults in a wide variety of areas, including education, employment, financial management, housing, emotional support, and more
- Permitting States to extend title IV-E assistance to otherwise eligible youth remaining in foster care after reaching age 18 and to youth who at age 16 or older exited foster care to either a kinship guardianship or adoption, provided that they have not yet reached age 19, 20, or

21—depending on State law—and are in school, employed, engaged in another activity designed to remove barriers to employment, or incapable of doing so due to a documented medical condition

For more information about the Fostering Connections Act, refer to [Program Instruction ACYF-CB-PI-08-05](#).

The [Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act](#) (PSTSFA) of 2014 includes the following provisions that support youth permanency:

- Limiting the use of another planned permanent living arrangement (APPLA) for youth age 16 and older
- Instituting requirements when APPLA is the goal, including the following:
 - Documenting at each permanency hearing the efforts to place the youth permanently with a parent or relative or in a guardianship or adoptive placement and providing compelling reasons why it is not in the youth's best interests to receive those placements
 - Ensuring the court asks the youth about their desired permanency outcome and making a determination that APPLA is the best permanency plan for the youth
 - Documenting the following at the permanency hearing and the subsequent 6-month periodic reviews:
 - Steps the agency is taking to ensure the foster family or child care institution follows the reasonable and prudent parent standard
 - Whether the youth has regular opportunities to engage in developmentally and age-appropriate activities

For more information about PSTSFA, refer to [Information Memorandum ACYF-CB-IM-14-03](#).

The [Family First Prevention Services Act](#) (FFPSA) of 2018 allows States and Tribes to seek approval to extend services under the Chafee program to youth up to age 23 if the agency extended the age for title IV-E foster care to 21 or provides comparable services to those youth using State or any other funds outside of title IV-E. For additional information, see [Information Memorandum ACYF-CB-IM-18-02](#). For information about how States have extended foster care, refer to Child Welfare Information Gateway's [Extension of Foster Care Beyond Age 18](#).

More recent guidance supporting permanency with kin is a [final rule](#) published by the Children's Bureau in 2023 on establishing separate licensing or approval standards for relative or kinship foster family homes. The rule is designed to support kinship families by allowing title IV-E agencies to adopt different licensing standards for kinship homes and requiring equal financial support for both kinship and nonrelative foster homes that are licensed or approved. Before the rule, many kinship caregivers faced challenges being held to the same licensing and approval standards as nonrelative foster homes. The rule encourages agencies to place as few burdens on kinship families as possible, which can contribute to more children living with kin and maintaining important relationships.

STRATEGIES FOR PERMANENCY PLANNING WITH YOUTH

The child welfare community has developed programs and practices that support permanency and connections for youth in foster care. Given that each youth's situational

and developmental needs change over time, caseworkers should treat permanency planning with youth as a process rather than a one-time event. It is also important to regularly revisit plans and accompanying strategies and adjust them as needed. The following strategies for establishing youth permanency are drawn from child welfare research and practice.

PRIORITIZING AUTHENTIC YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Authentic youth engagement involves actively and intentionally partnering with youth about their lives on their terms. It has been associated with numerous benefits for youth well-being, including improved outcomes related to permanency and social support, skills development, youth empowerment and agency, healthy brain development, attainment of protective factors, enhanced service receipt, and positive systems change (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021; Salazar et al., 2019). In permanency planning, it entails engaging in strategic planning conversations where youth can express their ideas about how they want to achieve permanency and creating a plan of action to reach those goals. Many youth show initial or even long-term resistance to permanency planning that involves the termination of their birth parents' rights because they still feel emotional ties to their families, or they may fear embarking on a relationship with a new family because of repeated past disappointments. Open, transparent conversations about permanency allow caseworkers to address these concerns and highlight different forms of permanency, such as guardianship. When engaging youth, caseworkers should focus on connections rather than just placement options (ACF, 2021).

This could mean asking questions such as, "What relationships are most important to you?" instead of "Do you have any relatives you can live with?"

The Quality Improvement Center on Engaging Youth in Finding Permanency (QIC-EY) identified several competencies for child welfare workers that support successful youth engagement, including the following (Wollen et al., 2022):

- **Building trusting relationships:**
Relationship building is critical to engaging youth, and developing trust takes time and adaptability, as some youth may be hesitant to trust new people. It is important for caseworkers to take time to learn about a youth's interests, expectations, and opinions. Every conversation is a learning opportunity. Partnering with existing connections in the young person's community, such as a teacher or coach, may support relationship building.
- **Taking a strength-based approach:**
Caseworkers can help build youth confidence by focusing on their unique strengths and abilities. This process involves seeing youth as the experts on their own lives and avoiding engagement that is patronizing or assumes adults know best.

Authentic youth engagement should occur as soon as a youth enters the child welfare system. Caseworkers should actively include young people in case planning and educate them about their rights. Let them know explicitly that they have the right to maintain meaningful relationships with family. Being involved with child welfare can be confusing and disheartening, so explicitly outlining their rights can help youth feel in control and more willing to explore connections.

More information about youth engagement is available in Information Gateway's publication [Prioritizing Youth Voice: The Importance of Authentic Youth Engagement in Case Planning](#). Its companion publication, [Using Your Voice: A Guide for Youth on Participating in Case Planning](#), provides information to help young people navigate the child welfare system.

Talking With Youth About Permanency

The following resources can better prepare professionals to talk with youth about permanency:

- ["From Conversations to Relationships: Engaging Teens in Permanency Planning"](#) (Information Gateway)
- [Belonging Matters—Helping Youth Explore Permanency](#) (Information Gateway)
- ["10 Tips for Helping Teens Explore Adoption"](#) (AdoptUSKids)

STRENGTHENING REUNIFICATION SERVICES

Returning safely to their families of origin is always the preferred outcome for children who enter foster care. While permanency goals change over time, reunification remains the case goal for more than half of children in care (Children's Bureau, 2022). Support services and activities to promote this goal, including parent-child visits (when child safety is not compromised), should be part of the youth's case plan. Parents may be facing a variety of challenges that impede timely reunification, such as substance misuse,

mental health challenges, domestic violence, or homelessness, as well as a lack of access to necessary services.

Reunification services should be strengths based, trauma informed, culturally responsive, and accessible. Child welfare professionals should be knowledgeable about services in their communities and make referrals for parents—both in preparation for reunification and after it has occurred—as indicated by each family’s needs and strengths. Parents may also be receiving services through other agencies or community organizations, so coordination with these other providers can be critical to assisting parents in receiving appropriate services without feeling overwhelmed. Since family situations often improve, it is important for child welfare professionals to regularly assess families’ readiness for reunification. Additionally, even if youth are not legally reunified with their parents, many return to their families later in life or otherwise maintain connections with them. Even if reunification is not actively part of a youth’s case plan, caseworkers can acknowledge the possibility of future contact with families of origin and work with the youth to resolve any issues with unresolved grief or potentially painful relationships as well as how they can make independent decisions about potential contact (Pokempner et al., 2018).

For more information, visit Information Gateway’s [Reunifying Families](#) webpage.

HOLISTICALLY PLANNING FOR THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

Along with helping youth work toward legal and relational permanency, caseworkers should also assist youth in preparing for the transition to adulthood. These activities

can support youth whether they eventually leave care by achieving permanency or aging out. Transition planning should be a holistic process that takes place over time and considers a young person’s mental, emotional, and developmental needs, rather than just the logistics of transitioning from care. A big part of this planning is assisting youth in identifying and nurturing connections with supportive adults who can continue to support youth as they mature into adulthood. For more information, explore Information Gateway’s guides for professionals, [Working With Youth to Develop a Transition Plan](#), and for foster families, [Helping Youth Transition to Adulthood: Guidance for Foster Parents](#).

EXPLORING RELATIONAL PERMANENCY

Although child welfare policies often focus on legal permanency, many youth may feel that establishing relational permanency is more important to them (Salazar et al., 2018). Relational permanency (lifelong connections with adults who, regardless of legal caregiving status, continue to support young people beyond their time in out-of-home care) can be a major source of support for youth who exit from care without legal permanency. Those who experience legal permanency through adoption and guardianship may also benefit from additional relationships with supportive adults because legal permanency does not guarantee relational permanency (Ball et al., 2021). Relational permanency could include connections between the youth and other family members and adults informally involved in the youth’s life (e.g., a friend’s parent). Youth may need support nurturing these connections, especially when factors such as geographic location add additional challenges to keeping in touch.

The quality of relationships that youth experience while growing up in out-of-home care affects whether those relationships last and become a source of relational permanency. Relationships that are empowering and allow youth to feel genuine care and emotional safety can evolve into extensive, mutually meaningful relationships that last into adulthood and provide stability and support (Ball et al., 2021).

Mentoring can provide youth in foster care with additional relational support. The existence of natural mentors—who could be teachers, coaches, caseworkers, neighbors, or others—in the lives of youth in foster care has been shown to positively affect their transition to adulthood, including in the areas of health, resilience, educational attainment, and improved self-esteem (Thompson et al., 2016). Engaging youth is an essential part of identifying these existing relationships.

The [Permanency Pact](#), developed by FosterClub, provides a formalized, facilitated process for adults to pledge and specify the support they can provide to youth in foster care.

UNDERSTANDING YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND PERMANENCY

To best support youth in care, caseworkers and families must understand the developmental changes and needs of youth. Although many youth may appear to be adults, their brains often have not yet reached full maturity. The incomplete development of youths' brains and hormonal changes can cause them to act impulsively or rely more on emotions than logic. This can impact their thoughts and decision-making about permanency. For example, their natural desire for independence can lead them to glamorize independent living.

Additionally, youth involved with child welfare usually have experienced some form of trauma. This can hinder brain development and impair youths' ability to regulate their emotions and behaviors, ultimately affecting their capacity to form healthy and lasting relationships (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2017). (For information about trauma-informed care, visit the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#).) Caseworkers and families will be better equipped to support youth when they recognize how brain development can affect youth behavior and decision-making and how certain actions or attitudes, including beliefs about permanency, are often a normal part of youth development rather than indicators of problematic or defiant behavior. Professionals should consider the role development may play in a young person's journey to permanency and be prepared to help them understand the pros and cons of their options.

For more information about brain development, refer to Information Gateway's publication [Child Maltreatment and Brain Development: A Primer for Child Welfare Professionals](#). In addition, the National Association of Social Workers offers an online training curriculum, [Integrating Adolescent Brain Development Into Child Welfare Practice With Older Youth](#), that combines findings from brain science research with information about trauma and social capital to inform practitioners' work with older youth.

HELPING YOUTH MAINTAIN RELATIONSHIPS WITH KIN AND SUPPORTING KIN CAREGIVERS

Maintaining or establishing relationships with kin can provide important connections and supports for youth and can lead to legal or relational permanency. It may take some

effort to locate relatives of youth, particularly for youth who have been in and out of care. In some cases, [fathers and paternal relatives](#) may be overlooked in case planning. By fully exploring these family resources, caseworkers can better identify family connections.

Agencies should make every effort to locate and contact kin when a child enters the child welfare system. Not only is it a requirement (Federal law requires that relatives be notified within 30 days of a child's placement in out-of-home care), but it is also an essential part of helping youth maintain and establish connections that can provide permanency. Agencies should implement intensive search and engagement strategies, such as those outlined in the Center for Excellence in Family Finding and Engagement's [Family Finding: Data and Practice Review of the Literature](#). Caseworkers should also practice youth engagement by asking youth about the important people in their lives. Once kin have been identified, caseworkers should regularly engage them in case planning and discuss ways they can be involved in the young person's life, even if they are not a placement option. This can be a building block to establishing relational permanency.

Another way agencies can support these connections is by licensing kin as foster parents. Placing children and youth with relatives can reduce trauma and provide a path to permanency through adoption or guardianship. Under the 2023 rule that promotes equal financial support for both kinship and nonrelative foster homes, title IV-E agencies have more opportunities to remove barriers for kin and support these important relationships.

Just as a youth's situation changes over time, family members' situations change as well. A

relative who is unable to care for a youth or maintain a strong personal connection at one point in time may be in a better situation to do so later. Therefore, caseworkers should regularly inquire with relatives about how they can support youth and continue to involve kin in case planning.

OFFERING GUARDIANSHIP AS AN OPTION

For youth who are reluctant to have legal ties permanently severed with their parents, as would occur through adoption, guardianship may be a good option to provide legal permanency. Guardians, who may be relatives or nonrelatives (depending on State law), are given parental responsibility and authority for the youth by a court, but the parental rights of the birth parents are not terminated. The Fostering Connections Act offers States and Tribes the option to provide kinship guardianship assistance payments under title IV-E on behalf of children who have been in foster care and for whom a relative is taking legal guardianship. As of December 2023, 42 States, the District of Columbia, 11 Tribes or Tribal consortia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands have approved title IV-E plan amendments that allow them to make guardianship assistance payments (Children's Bureau, 2024). Additionally, States have the option to continue foster care, adoption, and guardianship payments until ages 19, 20, or 21 for youth who are in school, employed, engaged in another activity designed to remove barriers to employment, or are incapable of doing so due to a documented medical condition.

For information about State statutes regarding the placement of children with relatives, view the Information Gateway publication [Kinship Guardianship as a Permanency Option](#).

Concurrent Planning

Concurrent planning is working toward multiple legal permanency solutions (e.g., adoption or guardianship in addition to reunification) at a time. Legal permanency can be delayed when an agency waits until parental rights have been terminated before considering alternative permanency plans. For example, a child living in kinship care may experience concurrent planning for both reunification and, should that not work out, guardianship with the kin caregiver. For additional information about concurrent planning, refer to Information Gateway's publication, [Concurrent Planning for Timely Permanency for Children](#).

RECRUITING NONRELATIVE FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE FAMILIES TO MEET CHILDREN'S SPECIFIC NEEDS

Not all youth have kin available or able to provide legal or relational permanency. For some youth, permanency efforts must shift to nonrelatives. [Recruiting and retaining families](#) for children in foster care carries great potential for finding them permanent adoptive or guardianship families. In FY 2022, foster parents became adoptive parents for 57 percent of the children who were adopted with public agency involvement (Children's Bureau, 2023). Part of working toward successful placements is finding families with the proper skills and experience to support youth, particularly given the challenges many youth involved with child welfare experience. Examples of characteristics of families who succeed in parenting youth from foster care include having flexible expectations,

motivation to parent, tolerance for rejection, effective communication, and a strong parent-child relationship (Day et al., 2018).

Examples of strategies agencies can use to recruit foster and adoptive families for youth appear below.

Child-focused recruitment. In child-focused or [child-specific recruitment](#), agencies and organizations focus on recruiting foster, adoptive, and kinship families based on an individual child's needs, interests, and connections. [Wendy's Wonderful Kids](#), a program of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, provides grants to public child welfare agencies and private adoption agencies to hire adoption recruiters to serve children in foster care, including those for whom finding an adoptive home may be particularly challenging, such as older youth, siblings, and children with disabilities.

Cultural considerations. Race, ethnicity, and culture are major elements of an individual's identity. Foster families who reflect the race, ethnicity, and culture of the children in their care are best suited to help those children maintain connections to their cultural identities, communities, and families (National Center for Diligent Recruitment, 2024). Recruiting diverse foster and adoptive families is an area where many States could improve; in the latest round of the Child and Family Services Reviews, only about one-third of States received a positive rating on efforts to recruit culturally reflective resource families (Children's Bureau, 2020).

Multimedia approaches. In our increasingly digital world, digital recruitment of foster and adoptive families can be very effective. Examples include targeted social media ads, photolisting profiles, and media features about

children in foster care. Digital recruitment can be cost- and time-effective and extend to new audiences beyond the reach of traditional marketing (California Department of Social Services, 2020). One example of a multimedia recruitment approach is the Northwest Adoption Exchange's [In-Depth Profiles](#). This youth-driven project encourages youth to share their passions, hobbies, skills, and future plans with potential families through videos, images, and self-written narratives.

Data-driven recruitment. Data-driven approaches have proven effective across the child welfare continuum, including in efforts to improve service delivery (Gemignani et al., 2024; Capacity Building Center for States, 2019). Using data about children and families, agencies can gather important information about what is needed to meet the needs of children in the system and apply findings to recruitment efforts. For example, data may point to needing more families that match the racial, cultural, or ethnic background of children, more families in a specific neighborhood or school zone, or more families for large sibling groups (Groh & Coon, 2022). Market segmentation is another data-driven strategy that agencies can use. It involves direct marketing to "segments," or groups of people who share certain traits or characteristics such as media usage, with the expectation that individuals within the segment will respond similarly. Agencies can apply this approach to resource family recruitment by collecting data on the traits of existing resource parents and using that information to identify, locate, and target recruitment efforts toward potential new resource parents (Melz et al., 2019).

Opportunities for personal connections. Creating opportunities for families and adults to meet youth who need homes can

help broaden the pool of potential resource families. Adults who may never have considered adopting may become more open to the idea once they meet a particular youth in need. Supportive relationships, such as mentoring, may also evolve into permanency options when adults find they have grown more connected to the youth. Adoption match events, in which waiting youth and families meet during scheduled fun activities, create opportunities to bring youth and prospective families together.

For more information and ideas about recruitment, visit the [National Center for Diligent Recruitment](#) website.

Maintaining Family Connections After Adoption

Some youth may resist adoption because they believe it requires severing relationships with their families of origin. However, this is often not the case, and many adoptions involve ongoing contact between children and families of origin. Supporting children in maintaining these important family connections can contribute to minimized feelings of grief and loss, healthy identity development, and increased supportive adult relationships (Information Gateway, 2019). Caseworkers can promote communication between adoptive families and families of origin by encouraging written contact agreements and educating children and families on ways to remain in contact. For more information, explore Information Gateway's publications for [professionals](#) and [adoptive families](#) on helping adopted children maintain important relationships with their families.

FOCUSING ON SUPPORTS BEFORE AND AFTER PERMANENCY

The provision of appropriate and timely services for both youth and resource families (e.g., adoptive, guardianship, and kinship families, as well as foster families whose placements may become permanent) may make the difference in whether permanency outcomes are successful. Research indicates that approximately 5 to 20 percent of children who exit foster care to adoption or guardianship experience discontinuity (Rolock et al., 2021). Getting supports in place before permanency may alleviate family stress and challenges when they arise. Postpermanency services have been associated with increased child and family well-being, increased family cohesion, reduced placement instability and disruption, reduced problem behaviors, and improved coping skills among parents (National Center for Enhanced Post-Adoption Support, 2024). Areas in which youth and families may need support before and after permanency include the following (Information Gateway, 2018):

- Helping youth cope with trauma, separation, and loss
- Assisting families in understanding how they can support youths' emotional, physical, intellectual, and behavioral development
- Preparing for adjustments in family dynamics after placement
- Discussing openness with and searching for family members
- Applying for financial assistance

Families may receive educational and informational services, clinical services, and financial assistance. They may also need assistance navigating other service systems

(e.g., participating in individualized education plans, obtaining health records). Child welfare professionals can help families seek out the appropriate resources, keeping in mind that needs will differ from family to family. They should also encourage youth to advocate for themselves and assist them as needed.

For additional information, refer to the following Information Gateway publications:

- [Providing Adoption Support and Preservation Services](#)
- [Preparing Children and Youth for Adoption or Other Family Permanency](#)

LEANING INTO COMMUNITY AND CROSS-SYSTEM PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships across systems and communities can reduce the time children spend awaiting permanency (Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative, n.d.). This includes interagency work with housing, mental health, juvenile justice, and education systems and partnerships with community service providers. Benefits can include the following (Capacity Building Center for States, 2017):

- Increased knowledge of and access to services for children and families
- An integrated approach to services that meet individualized needs
- Better coordination between service providers to address cooccurring issues
- Increased ability to track families across agencies and providers

Holistically supporting youth requires understanding their overlapping needs and working collaboratively to address them. For more information, explore the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute brief [Building and Sustaining Child Welfare Partnerships](#).

Working With the Courts

Since the courts must approve permanent placements, the legal system plays an integral role in helping youth achieve timely permanency. Child welfare agencies can benefit from partnering closely with local courts to support and expedite permanency efforts. Child welfare professionals can help court personnel understand the significance of legal and relational permanency and that permanency can and should be a goal for every child. Court personnel should also know how they can fully engage youth in hearings. To promote youth participation, judges can prepare youth for court, help them understand the purpose of hearings, let them know who will attend, and help them understand their rights (National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges [NCJFCJ], 2022). They can also support youth by calling them by name, encouraging them to have a mentor or advocate, building rapport, and asking if they have questions throughout the hearing. For more information about the court's role in promoting permanency, explore the following resources:

[*Judges' Roles in Promoting Youth-Centered Legal Permanency*](#) (NCJFCJ)

[*Four Ways That Courts Can Actively Engage Children and Youth Involved in Child Welfare Proceedings*](#) (QIC-EY)

STRENGTHENING THE WORKFORCE TO SUPPORT YOUTH PERMANENCY

Although many caseworkers and agencies recognize that youth can and should achieve permanency, there is still work to be done so that caseworker beliefs and actions, as well as agency culture, reflect and support this. It is important for child welfare professionals, service providers, and other adults in youths' lives to believe that permanency is possible and establish policies and practices that promote permanency—both legal and relational.

To be effective advocates for youth, child welfare workers should be aware of their individual views on what legal and relational permanency look like and the importance they place on each type of permanency. It is also helpful for workers to understand how youth's experiences, including past trauma, affect those views. Caseworkers are likely also working with youth on independent living skills. Still, it is important to remember that while preparing youth for adulthood is required and critical, it should not replace seeking permanent families or other permanent connections. Achieving youth permanency can be a time-intensive process, so it is critical that caseworkers have [manageable workloads and caseloads](#) and are provided with internal supports and training to allow for a continued focus on supporting the youth they serve.

CONCLUSION

Youth need safe, loving, and stable homes and relationships; however, they may face numerous challenges on their path to permanency. Child welfare and other related professionals should be well-equipped to support youth on their path to both legal and relational permanency. The presence of supportive connections with caring adults greatly affects youth's life outcomes. Child welfare agencies should use all available avenues to achieve permanence and, at the same time, help youth identify, maintain, and strengthen connections to a network of caring adults while they are in an out-of-home placement. It is also critical that agencies help prepare youth for independence if they exit foster care without a permanent home. This process should begin well before a youth's 18th birthday. To best support these youth, it is crucial to advance research, policy, and other resources in the years ahead regarding how we can best support and collaborate with youth in care.

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