

Proceedings from the Research Roundtable at the
2006 **National Convening on Youth Permanence**
Recommendations for

Policy

Practice
&

Research

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In 2008, Columbia University Press will publish a book of key research that was presented originally at the roundtable.



INTRODUCTION

On September 12-13, 2006, the Annie E. Casey Foundation/Casey Family Services brought together leading child welfare researchers from across the United States to lend their collective expertise to the urgent need of achieving family permanence for older children and youth in foster care. The Research Roundtable served as a forum for a rich dialogue on the successes and challenges in achieving family permanence for this population. Through formal presentations, responses, and open discussion, the invited researchers and other guests identified critical issues and explored emerging policy and practice opportunities. Together they developed recommendations for policymakers, child welfare service providers, and the child-welfare research community to increase the likelihood that each youth in foster care will leave the system with an enduring family relationship that he or she can count on for life. This report addresses the results of the Research Roundtable as the discussion, and recommendations focused on the policy and advocacy responses that are needed to promote family permanence. The report is organized into three sections that look at the same key themes from different perspectives.

The Meaning of Permanence

Permanence means 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 physical, emotional, social, cognitive, and spiritual well-being; and
- assures lifelong connections to extended family, siblings, other significant adults, family history and traditions, race and ethnicity, culture, religion, and language.

In achieving permanency outcomes, the objective is the optimal balance of physical, emotional/relational, legal, and cultural dimensions within every child's and youth's array of relationships.

Adapted from Maluccio, A.N., Warsb, R., & Pine, B.A. (1993). Family reunification: An overview. In B.A. Pine, R. Warsb, & A.N. Maluccio (Eds.), Together again: Family reunification in foster care (pp. 3–19). Washington, D.C.: Child Welfare League of America.

The Research Roundtable addressed three critical topics:

Describing the problem: What are the characteristics of older children and youth in foster care? What are their permanency outcomes? How permanent is “permanence” for this group of children?

Policy responses: What do we know and what do we need to learn about effective legislative reform and advocacy efforts designed to ensure permanence for older children and youth in foster care? What is our understanding of guardianship arrangements and how can policy best support permanence with kin? What is the focus of court-reform efforts and how have they addressed family permanence for older children and youth?

Practice responses: What is the current understanding of best practice in reunification and adoption as permanency outcomes for older children and youth? What is known about preparing youth in care for adulthood and what more do we need to know? What are the roles of family involvement meetings and community engagement strategies in promoting permanence for older children and youth?

The Characteristics and Experiences of Youth in Foster Care

A Data Snapshot

As of September 30, 2005, 45 percent of the children and youth in foster care in the United States were 12 years of age or older (230,850 children).

Many of the youth in foster care do not have family permanency goals. As of September 30, 2005, 37,628 youth had permanence goals of long-term foster care and another 31,938 youth had permanency goals of emancipation.

Each year, thousands of youth leave care without family relationships. In FY 2005, more than 20,000 youth left foster care through emancipation (24,407 youth) or by running away (4,445).

Research has informed the understanding of some of the factors associated with achieving – and not achieving – family permanence for youth in foster care specifically, youth ages 12 and older. Research tells us:

- When compared to younger children, youth tend to move more quickly to reunification but more slowly toward adoption.
- When children enter foster care at older ages, it is more likely that they will spend more of the remainder of their childhoods in care.
- Youth are more likely than younger children to spend time in group care and are the least likely to be in family-based care where they can establish committed, long-term relationships with caring adults.
- Most youth in “independent living” programs entered care during adolescence and have been separated from their families for several years on average.
- Youth who do not leave care to join families are more likely to have had more placement moves.
- Even when youth are not formally reunited with their birth families, they often reunite themselves by returning to them after exiting care through emancipation.

These findings highlight some of the issues that require the attention of child welfare researchers if practice and policy are to promote family permanence effectively for all youth in foster care.

Cross-Cutting Themes and Recommendations for the Child Welfare Research Community

Key themes emerged from the Research Roundtable in five areas:

- permanency needs of youth in foster care;
- permanence and preparation for adulthood;
- policy issues;
- practice strategies; and
- characteristics of the research that is needed to advance our understanding of how to achieve and sustain family permanence for youth in foster care.

In each area, participants advanced recommendations for the child welfare policy, practice, and research communities. The following sections review these targeted recommendations.

Section I:

Recommendations for the Child Welfare Policy and Advocacy Communities

The Permanency Needs of Youth in Foster Care

Key Themes

Family permanence for youth is a complex concept that encompasses legal status, geographic location, and social connections. The primary focus has been on legal permanence and physical stability, and less attention has been given to emotional security or the social aspects of permanence.

Some groups of youth in care are more likely to leave care without permanent family connections. Attention must be given to the permanency needs of different populations of youth in foster care and the strengths that youth bring to the process of planning, achieving, and sustaining permanence.

Recommendations for Policymakers and Advocates

Explicitly recognize and create incentives through policy that promote the emotional and social dimensions of permanence in individualized assessment and service planning.

Fund research to enhance the understanding of emotional security and the variety of connections that youth establish through the range of their relationships.

Support studies that examine the implications of the foster care experience on adolescents' social functioning and identity formation, particularly as these processes affect youth's motivation and capacity to expand family connections.

Fund research that identifies the more malleable protective factors associated with the success of youth in foster care.

Craft a policy framework that recognizes and supports the different permanency needs of individual youth in foster care. Incorporate within the framework a proactive assessment of the needs and a consideration of all alternatives for those at greatest risk (e.g., older youth who have been in care for more than two years and who may be poor candidates for reunification).

Fund research that describes the permanence experiences of different populations of youth in foster care, including youth of color; gay, lesbian, bisexual, questioning, transgender, and intersexed (GLBTQI) youth; and youth involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

Explicitly recognize in policy the strengths of youth in planning for and meeting their permanency needs, including the factors associated with youth resilience.

Permanence and Preparation for Adulthood

Overarching Issues

Key Themes

Recommendations for Policymakers and Advocates

Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) continues to be used for many children who may benefit from pursuing permanent family connections. APPLA does not mean system efforts should be focused on independent living preparation without regard to family connections. In fact, many of the relationships youths develop can provide additional opportunities to connect to skills, jobs, assets, and other learning experiences that parallel more typical, normative developmental paths.

Develop policies that require that permanence be sought for all youth in foster care and that efforts continue to be made to identify and support potential enduring relationships irrespective of the permanency goal.

Recognize and support family connections as pivotal to the preparation of youth in foster care for adulthood.

Require that a caring committed adult be identified for each youth who leaves foster care without the benefit of legal permanence.

Strengthen the policy interface between the Adoption and Safe Families Act and the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act so that family permanence and preparation-for-adulthood services are recognized as complementary.

Eliminate policies that penalize youth who achieve permanence, such as those that render youth ineligible for services or educational benefits if they return home or are adopted at a younger age.

The active involvement of youth in permanency planning and preparation for adulthood is critical to successful outcomes.

Require that youth be actively engaged in planning for their future and that their input is considered carefully to individualize the plan, fostering both autonomy and ownership.

Require the involvement of youth on advisory boards, advocacy efforts, and other initiatives designed to improve the quality of permanency services and preparation of youth for adulthood.

Permanence and preparation for adulthood services must be developed and provided with an understanding of the disproportionate representation of children and youth of color in foster care and the disparate outcomes that historically have been achieved for these children and youth.

Place greater policy emphasis on the disparate permanency outcomes for youth of color in foster care.

Examine and refine policy approaches to ensure that culturally appropriate permanence and preparation-for-adulthood services are provided to African-American, Latino, and Native-American youth and their families.

Experience suggests that GLBTQI youth are not being well served through permanence or preparation-for-adulthood services. Research on outcomes for GLBTQI youth in care is limited, but there are indications that sexual identity issues and explorative behavior can contribute to instability and undermine permanence.

Develop formal policies that prohibit discrimination against GLBTQI youth in foster care and against GLBTQI prospective foster and adoptive families.

Recognize the permanence and preparation-for-adulthood needs of GLBTQI youth and ensure the provision of appropriate, competent services.

Post-Foster Care Outcomes for Youth

Key Themes

Recommendations for Policymakers and Advocates

Many youth in foster care are not being well prepared for adulthood. Recent outcome studies identify an elevated risk for a variety of physical and mental health problems and other troubling outcomes, coupled with a decreased likelihood of having adequate health insurance.

Re-examine the concept of “independence” for youth at the age of 18 and the acceptability of “aging out” as an appropriate policy and practice option.

Revisit eligibility policies that assume that youth are ready for life on their own at the age of 18.

Re-examine policies that end government responsibility for youth in foster care at age 18.

Reframe the goal for youth from “independent living preparation” to “preparation for adulthood.”

Reframe policy to address “interdependent living” as opposed to “independent living” to underscore the balanced focus on relationship and skill building.

Build a body of knowledge regarding evidence-based practices. Provide funding for rigorous evaluation of independent living programs with a focus on identifying the elements of effective preparation programs, describing costs and steps for implementation in other settings.

Independent living programs have focused primarily on skill development with little attention to youth’s emotional and social connections.

Require that preparation-for-adulthood services include active efforts to establish family connections for all youth preparing to exit from foster care.

Promote the involvement of the youth’s caregivers as life-skills teachers.

Promote the identification and involvement of natural helpers – birth parents, other caregivers, and mentors – to support youth and participate in their youth’s life-skills development plan.

The Chafee Foster Care Independence Act made resources available to serve youth, but little is known about the impact of these resources on the level and effectiveness of services made available to youth. Federal efforts to expand the Chafee evaluation are underway.

Require an examination of Chafee eligibility regulations and criteria to determine if resources are available to fund the services and support that youth need.

Extend support to agencies to help them meet reporting requirements.

Utilize the results of the evaluation to further strengthen the Chafee program.

Research demonstrates very poor outcomes for many youth who “age out” of foster care in relation to physical health, mental health, employment, housing, income, and safety. More remains to be understood about the longer-term outcomes for youth who leave care through emancipation or “aging out.”

Require that youth, family members, and other key adults in the youth’s life be actively engaged in the process of preparing the youth for adulthood.

Place greater policy emphasis on the mental health needs of youth in foster care.

Post-Foster Care Outcomes for Youth

Key Themes

Recommendations for Policymakers and Advocates

Place greater policy emphasis on educational services and supports for older children and youth in foster care. Develop policies that require or promote youth achieving a high school diploma before exiting foster care.

Emphasize in policy the importance of building youth's economic capital through financial services and programs that provide them with financial resources.

Fund ongoing longitudinal studies of the outcomes for youth following their exit from foster care, with a focus on the factors that predict success or failure for foster-care alumni, particularly the impact of having connections to family and/or other key resource people in the youth's life.

Fund research that examines the outcomes for youth who leave care from different placement settings: living with kin, living with nonkin, and congregate care.

Analyze the impact of the Medicaid extension program (Medicaid coverage through age 21 for youth who emancipate from foster care); how states are using this program; the rate of youth's utilization of services; and the effects of this program on youth's health outcomes. Create incentives and supports that promote states' participation in this program.

Former foster youth need transitional supports and services during the critical years of early adulthood.

Offer youth the opportunity to remain in foster care until age 21 and provide youth during this period with educational and employment opportunities and with services to ensure permanent family connections.

Provide support for transitional housing programs for youth that also offer job training and placement services.

Provide support for programs that offer youth opportunities to earn and save money that they can use to obtain housing or attend post-secondary educational programs.

Little is known about youth who exit foster care to other service systems that may incur substantial social and financial costs. Effective early intervention and prevention services could represent substantial savings.

Fund research that describes the characteristics of youth who exit foster care to the mental health, juvenile/criminal justice, and other service systems and the extent to which child welfare services, particularly family permanency services, are provided to youth with these discharge outcomes.

Examine the costs averted by effective preventive and early intervention services.

Many youth leave care by running away, but there is very limited understanding of the characteristics of these youths, the reasons they run, or how to reduce running behavior. Many youth who run away reunite with their birth parents on their own at some point.

Place greater policy emphasis on youth who leave foster care through running away and on development of programs and services that can reduce running behaviors.

Recognize in policy that youth may return to birth family when they exit care and support practices that engage families in resolving issues that may continue to place youth at risk should they return home.

Family Permanence for Youth in Foster Care / Family Permanence and Placement Factors

Key Themes

Recommendations for Policymakers and Advocates

Placement instability undermines achieving family permanence for youth in foster care.

Strengthen policies that promote placement stability for youth and their ongoing connections with birth families.

Fund evaluations of cost-effective strategies regarding placement stability and cost-benefit analyses that demonstrate the value of placement stability for youth and for society.

Fund studies that examine the impact of placement moves on youth's connections with their birth families.

Support services that hold the potential to stabilize youth's placements while they are in foster care, such as Multi-Dimensional Foster Care.

Youth placed in congregate care settings are less likely to achieve family permanence.

Clearly define the factors associated with the appropriate use of congregate care as a placement resource for youth.

Require permanency planning and permanency services for youth in congregate care.

Fund studies of the impact of reducing reliance on congregate care on the achievement of family permanence.

Family Permanence through Reunification with Parents and Relatives

Reunification is the most common permanency exit for older children and youth in foster care. Reunification reflects the core social values of respect for privacy and the integrity of the family institution.

Place emphasis on reunification as the preferred permanency option for children and youth in foster care.

The nature of reunification has not been carefully studied. For instance, the relative proportion of planned and unplanned self-reunification is not clear.

Focus on cases involving youth who are removed for the first time from their birth families and the provision of intensive time-limited reunification services.

Support strong partnerships with families that focus on family strengths.

Planned reunification efforts are most successful with younger children and children placed for the first time.

Promote frequent parent-child visits and the involvement of foster parents in the work with birth parents to build an alliance and to model parenting.

Reunification is the permanency exit most prone to system reentry.

Explicitly recognize siblings in placement and permanency planning and put priority on placing siblings together and on facilitating their ongoing contact when they cannot be placed together.

Require caseworkers to vigorously explore ties to youth's birth families, siblings, and relatives before the youth reaches 16 years of age.

Include, as a key component of reunification services; post-reunification supports and the coordination of services across systems (mental health, substance abuse treatment, and domestic violence) for parents.

Family Permanence through Reunification with Parents and Relatives

Siblings represent key family connections and potential lifelong supports regardless of reunification with caregivers.

Support youth's connections with their siblings through policies that promote the placement of siblings together and that promote sibling contact when they are not placed together.

Support relationships with siblings in and out of foster care as key family connections as youth transition to adulthood.

Growing numbers of children and youth are cared for by kin when children and youth must enter foster care.

Require that services and supports be provided to youth and their kinship families.

Research suggests significant benefits for youth when permanence is achieved through kinship care, particularly when subsidized guardianship is available to kin families.

Include within Title IV-E of the Social Security Act federal funds for subsidized guardianship so that relatives have the same supports as families who adopt children from foster care.

Critically examine different models of subsidized guardianship with regard to the outcomes achieved for youth in foster care. Fund research that examines the impact of different approaches in achieving and sustaining permanence for youth.

Assess policy options in order to make guardianship financially feasible for kin, while not creating disincentives for reunification.

Address the impact of the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children on the placement of youth with kin across state lines.

Foster Families as Permanent Family Resources

Foster parents play a significant role as permanency resources for many older children and youth in foster care.

Recognize foster parents' roles in achieving permanence for older children and youth.

Address the services and supports that foster parents need to provide legal and social permanence for older children and youth.

Family Permanence through Adoption

<p>Questions remain as to how termination of parental rights (TPR) and adoption can be most effectively used in achieving permanence for youth in foster care. The risk of creating legal orphans when parental rights are terminated without establishing a new parent is troubling, as is delaying TPR until a permanent family is found.</p>	<p>Address the appropriateness of termination of parental rights (TPR) and adoption for older children and youth whose developmental needs differ from younger children.</p> <p>Examine the impact of termination of parental rights policies on youth and families of color.</p> <p>Fund studies that work to identify characteristics or conditions associated with either aggressive or delayed TPR.</p> <p>Fund studies that investigate practice approaches regarding terminating parental rights and pursuing adoption as the goal for older children and youth.</p>
<p>Adoption practices and policies for youth are necessarily different from adoption practices and policies for younger children.</p>	<p>Develop and implement adoption policies for youth that take into account the developmental status and needs of adolescents.</p> <p>Provide support for the recruitment and support of adoptive families for youth.</p>
<p>Little attention has been given to the experiences and needs of youth whose parents' rights have been terminated but who have not been adopted.</p>	<p>Develop policies that respond to the needs of youth free for adoption whose parents' rights have been terminated. Consider post-TPR reunification options, such as reinstatement of parental rights under certain circumstances.</p> <p>Critically assess current policies regarding termination of parental rights practice from a developmental perspective, taking into account the different developmental needs of youth compared to the needs of younger children.</p> <p>Fund research that identifies and evaluates approaches that are effective in reconnecting youth with their parents following termination of parental rights.</p>
<p>For many youth, permanence is "impermanent," that is, they return to foster care following reunification or their placements with kin or adoptive families disrupt.</p>	<p>Fund research that enhances the understanding of the impact of "impermanent" permanence on youth's behavior and adjustment and on ongoing permanency planning efforts with youth when initial permanency efforts have not been successful.</p> <p>Fund post-permanency services and supports, including respite care, for all forms of permanence: post-reunification, post-guardianship, and post-adoption.</p> <p>Provide adequate financial subsidies for families who adopt or assume guardianship of youth in foster care.</p> <p>Fund research that tests the effectiveness, costs, and benefits of post-permanency services.</p>

Policy to Support System Reform Initiatives

Overarching Issues

Key Themes

Recommendations for Policymakers and Advocates

Key levers of policy change in the child welfare arena are legislative reform, class-action litigation and court mandates, and policy approaches that provide for the testing of innovative policies and programs.

Fund research that investigates the impact of different strategies in successfully instituting lasting child welfare reform, including studies that examine the impact of federal and state legislative reforms and class-action litigation that result in judicially-mandated, systems-wide child welfare reforms.

Expand the benefits of the Title IV-E waiver demonstration program in testing out innovative child welfare policies and practices.

Provide funding to support innovative practice and corresponding evaluations.

Adequate and flexible funding is essential in achieving and sustaining permanence for youth.

Provide adequate and flexible funding to support the full range of permanency options: family reunification, guardianship, placement with relatives, and adoption.

Federal Policy

Data indicate that since the enactment of the Adoption and Safe Families Act, in 1997 the total number of adoptions has increased and the number of children being reunified with their families has slightly declined. There is extremely limited information, however, on the broader impact that federal policy reforms have on efforts to achieve and sustain family permanence for youth.

Develop a clear understanding of how federal funds are being used for services that support and strengthen families, that is, services that prevent the need for children and youth to enter foster care and that support the safe reunification of children and youth with their families after they enter foster care.

Critically examine the impact of provisions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act on achieving and sustaining family permanence for youth, including the reunification bypass provision and the adoption incentive program.

Assess whether the permanency options of reunification and adoption are being considered appropriately for older children and youth in foster care.

Re-examine the current incentives solely for adoption outcomes and the benefits to be achieved from creating incentives for all permanency outcomes.

Examine the impact of the adoption incentive program, and the more recent incentives for adoptions of children ages 9 and older in particular.

Much more can be learned from the Child and Family Services Reviews about permanency outcomes for older children and youth in foster care.

Identify strategies for more fully utilizing the Child and Family Services Reviews to provide information on permanency outcomes for older children and youth and approaches that are effective in achieving and sustaining permanence.

The impact of federal policy on permanency outcomes for children and youth of color has not been critically examined.

Assess the impact of the Indian Child Welfare Act and the Multiethnic Placement Act on achievement of permanence for children and youth of color in foster care.

Court Reform Initiatives

<p>The partnership between the courts and child welfare agencies needs to be strengthened in order to improve permanency outcomes for youth.</p>	<p>Promote strong collaboration between the courts and child welfare agencies in planning for and achieving permanence for youth in foster care.</p> <p>Require and support data-sharing between courts and child welfare agencies in accordance with all protections.</p> <p>Implement cross-training for court and child welfare staff members.</p> <p>Fund research on approaches that promote court-child welfare coordination and collaboration, including cross-training programs.</p> <p>Promote the involvement of youth-in-court training and system reform.</p> <p>Require coordinated responses to the needs of youth who are involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.</p> <p>Promote multi-system collaboration that brings together court and child welfare partners in each state's Court Improvement Project, the Child and Family Service Review process, the development and implementation of the state's Performance Improvement Plan, and other system reform initiatives.</p> <p>Fund ongoing rigorous evaluations of the dependency court reform process, with greater attention to youth dependency issues within the context of judicial system performance.</p>
<p>Judicial policies and practices must be strengthened to ensure that courts are able to make fully informed and timely decisions for youth in foster care.</p>	<p>Require the use of court performance measures that include measures regarding the timely achievement of permanence.</p> <p>Promote the implementation of one judge/one family models.</p> <p>Require that the voices of youth be heard in their own court proceedings.</p> <p>Develop policies that require reasonable judicial caseloads and the caseloads of attorneys who represent children/youth and birth parents.</p> <p>Implement benchmark permanency hearings in which all parties (youth, judge, and supportive adults) come together in the courtroom to discuss the youth's plans and goals and the services and skills that the youth needs.</p> <p>Institute "no continuance" policies, time-certain docketing, and other policies that support timely judicial decision making.</p> <p>Develop and implement alternative dispute resolution processes, such as mediation, to expedite permanency decision making.</p> <p>Amend federal law to require that both children and their parents have counsel appointed to represent them in all child welfare court proceedings.</p>

Policy Support for Essential Practice Strategies

Key Themes

Recommendations for Policymakers and Advocates

Policy must focus on expanding and improving front-end services to prevent children from entering foster care whenever possible.

Provide support for evidence-based programs that are successful in lowering the incidence of child abuse and neglect and in reducing the need for children to enter foster care.

Promote the use of team decision-making models that involve youth, parents, other supportive adults, and community partners in meetings with child welfare professionals to make decisions as to whether a child should be placed in foster care.

Permanence must be planned and achieved based on developmental considerations.

Refine policy approaches regarding permanence based on an understanding of the developmental differences between younger and older children and youth in foster care.

Family involvement meetings have been found to play an important role in supporting better permanency outcomes for youth in foster care and their families.

Promote family involvement meetings and ensure that there are adequate levels of financial support and staffing to implement these meetings in accordance with good practice.

Require or promote the attendance of youth at family involvement meetings. One option is legislation that states that youth have the right to participate in family involvement meetings, absent strong reasons to the contrary.

Fund more in-depth research on family involvement meetings and the outcomes achieved.

Fund evaluations of family-involvement-meeting approaches with regard to cultural competence.

Experience suggests that better outcomes for youth will be achieved when the child welfare agency has strong relationships with the communities from which youth come.

Recognize the role of community engagement in supporting and strengthening families.

Encourage and support cross-systems collaborations that include community-based programs.

Utilize flexible funding approaches that provide financial support for traditional and nontraditional services, including informal community-based services and supports.

Fund research to assess the effectiveness of different child welfare agency outreach and community-engagement strategies in relation to achieving and sustaining family permanence for youth in foster care.

In many communities, services and supports are extremely limited for parents and for kin who informally assume responsibility for the care of their relative children.

Recognize the unmet service and support needs of parents and kin caregivers.

Support practices and strategies that can be used by child welfare agencies in collaboration with community partners to enhance the services and supports that parents and kin caregivers receive.

Policy Support for Ongoing Research

Key Theme

Recommendations for Policymakers and Advocates

Because of limitations in national child welfare databases, data do not permit a determination of whether youth actually have achieved and sustained legal and social permanence. Many agencies have little or no access to information concerning aggregate outcomes.

Expect and support data collection that describes needs, services, and outcomes.

Endorse through policy the data elements that are needed to provide a clearer understanding of the youth in foster care and their experiences while in, and after leaving, foster care.

Fund research that tests new approaches to the collection of national data that will facilitate the collection of data on: (a) permanence and other outcomes; and (b) disproportionate representation and disparities in service provision and outcomes.

Utilize available data on whether youth have achieved legal and/or social permanence to continuously strengthen permanency policy.

Policymakers and researchers are important partners in developing and utilizing the results of research and evaluations to inform policies that advance successful and sustained family connections for youth in foster care.

Regularly consult with researchers regarding the development of research and evaluations and the use of research-based knowledge in order to evaluate and strengthen current and future policy.

Increase accountability in child welfare by measuring system performance more aggressively and collecting better and more relevant data.

Adopt rules requiring child welfare agencies to employ practices and strategies that have proven successful in boosting family permanence for youth.

It is important to design carefully and replicate research to better understand effective ways to achieve and sustain family permanence and other key outcomes for youth in foster care.

Recognize the need for evidence-based policy initiatives.

Fund studies that use mixed research methods, including both quantitative and qualitative research that feature the voices of youth.

Support the replication of well-designed studies that have focused on outcomes for youth in foster care so that studies use the same measures and deepen the current knowledge base.

Fund efforts to develop improved methods and instrumentation for tracking progress and outcomes for youth in foster care over time and for measuring program implementation and fidelity.

Fund ongoing longitudinal studies of youth in foster care.

Section II:

Recommendations for the Child Welfare Practice Community

The Permanency Needs of Youth in Foster Care

Key Themes

Family permanence for youth is a complex concept that encompasses legal status, geographic location, and social connections. The primary focus has been on legal permanence and physical stability, and less attention has been given to emotional security and the social aspects of permanence.

Some groups of youth in care are more likely to leave the system without permanent family connections. Attention must be given to the permanency needs of different populations of youth in foster care and the strengths that youth bring to the process of planning, achieving, and sustaining permanence.

Recommendations for Practitioners

Explicitly recognize the emotional and social dimensions of permanence through individualized assessment and service planning.

Develop a better understanding of emotional security and the variety of connections youth establish through the range of their relationships.

Consider the implications of the foster care experience on adolescents' social functioning and identity formation, particularly as these processes affect youth's motivation and capacity to expand family connections.

Maximize the more malleable protective factors associated with the success of youth in foster care (e.g., reduce placement instability due to systemic placement changes; provide information to youth and parents to promote positive, realistic expectations for success and enduring relationships).

Recognize that different groups of youth in foster care will have different permanency experiences and needs. Proactively assess the needs and consider all alternatives for those at greatest risk (e.g., older youth who have been in care for more than two years and who may be poor candidates for reunification).

Identify the strengths of youth in planning for and meeting their permanency needs.

Utilize concurrent planning from the time that each youth enters foster care.

Permanence and Preparation for Adulthood

Overarching Issues

Key Themes

Recommendations for Practitioners

Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) continues to be used for many children who may benefit from pursuing permanent family connections. APPLA does not mean system efforts should be focused on independent living preparation without regard to family connections. In fact, many of the relationships youths develop can provide additional opportunities to connect to skills, jobs, assets, and other learning experiences paralleling more typical normative developmental paths.

Seek permanence for all youth in foster care and remain alert for potentially enduring relationships irrespective of the permanency goal.

Recognize and support family connections as pivotal to the preparation of youth in foster care for adulthood.

Require that a caring, committed adult be identified for each youth who leaves foster care without the benefit of legal permanence.

The active involvement of youth in permanency planning and preparation for adulthood is critical to successful outcomes.

Actively engage youth in planning for their futures. Ensure that their input is considered carefully to individualize the plan, fostering both autonomy and ownership.

Build self-advocacy skills to promote successful self-representation.

Involve youth on advisory boards, advocacy efforts, and other initiatives designed to improve the quality of permanency services and preparation of youth for adulthood.

Permanency and preparation for adulthood services must be developed and provided with an understanding of the disproportionate representation of children and youth of color in foster care and the disparate outcomes that historically have been achieved for these children and youth.

Use culturally competent practices to achieve and sustain permanence and prepare youth of color for adulthood.

Actively recruit foster and adoptive families of color through the use of minority-specializing agencies.

Experience suggests that gay, lesbian, bisexual, questioning, transgender, and intersexed (GLBTQI) youth are not being well served through permanence or preparation for adulthood services. Research on outcomes for GLBTQI youth in care is limited, but there are indications that sexual identity issues and explorative behavior can contribute to instability and undermine permanence.

Actively work to ensure that GLBTQI youth in foster care are not the victims of discrimination.

Recognize the permanency and preparation-for-adulthood needs of GLBTQI youth and ensure the provision of appropriate, competent services.

Promote the recruitment of GLBTQI foster and prospective adoptive families.

Train foster and adoptive families on gay- and lesbian-affirming competencies.

The child welfare workforce must be well trained to ensure that youth achieve and sustain family permanence and are well prepared for adulthood.

Train caseworkers and their supervisors on best practices in achieving and sustaining family permanence for youth and preparing youth for adulthood.

Post-Foster Care Outcomes for Youth

Key Themes

Many youth in foster care are not being well prepared for adulthood. Recent outcome studies identify an elevated risk for a variety of physical and mental health problems and other troubling outcomes, coupled with a decreased likelihood of having adequate health insurance.

Independent living programs have primarily focused on skill development with little attention to the youth's emotional and social connections.

The Chafee Foster Care Independence Act has made resources available to serve youth, but little is known about the impact of these resources on the level and effectiveness of services made available to youth. Federal efforts to expand the Chafee evaluation are underway.

Recommendations for Practitioners

Recognize that youth in foster care, like other youth, are not ready to live independently at age 18.

Articulate the goal of “interdependent living to youth,” not “independent living,” to help underscore the balanced focus on relationship and skill development.

Expand efforts to ensure that youth have access to health care through Medicaid or other health insurance; take advantage of programs designed to strengthen life skills and relationship building; and access the range of services that young people need.

Draw on research to develop and strengthen effective preparation-for-adulthood services. Seek out and use promising evidence-informed practices.

Integrate efforts to promote enduring family connections and preparation for adulthood.

Involve the youth's caregivers as life skills teachers. Review life-skills-training curricula in light of expanding active family involvement in the training and practice from an early age.

Expand the number of natural helpers available to support youth. Explicitly and proactively address the roles of birth parents, substitute caregivers, and mentors in the youth's life skills development plan.

Teach youth the skills they need in natural settings and in “real life” situations.

Scrutinize the Chafee eligibility regulations and criteria to determine if sufficient resources are available to implement the services and support that youth need.

Document youth needs, services, and outcomes as required under the Chafee Act.

Post-Foster Care Outcomes for Youth

Key Themes

Recommendations for Practitioners

Research demonstrates very poor outcomes for many youth who “age out” of foster care particularly related to health, mental health, employment, housing, income, and safety. More remains to be understood about the longer term outcomes for youth who leave care through emancipation or “aging out.”

Understand the considerable challenges that youth face upon leaving care without a family.

Identify and build on youth’s strengths and assets that can be mobilized in preparing them for adulthood.

Assist youth in developing their “social capital” through healthy connections with family, mentors, and role models.

Assist youth in developing “economic capital” through financial services and programs that provide them with financial resources.

Address the mental health needs of youth in foster care. Strengthen preparation for adulthood services for youth who are experiencing emotional or behavioral difficulties.

Ensure that youth have Medicaid eligibility that will continue after they exit foster care.

Ensure that youth receive educational services and supports. Work to ensure that each youth achieves a high school diploma before exiting foster care.

Former foster youth need transitional supports and services during the critical years of early adulthood.

Offer youth the opportunity to remain in foster care until age 21. Provide youth, during this period, with educational and employment opportunities and with services to ensure permanent family connections.

Develop transitional housing programs for youth that also offer job-training and placement services.

Implement programs that provide youth with opportunities to earn and save money that they can use to obtain housing or attend post-secondary educational programs.

Little is known about youth who exit foster care to other service systems.

Develop information on youth who exit foster care to the mental health, juvenile/criminal justice, and other service systems, and the extent to which child welfare services, particularly family permanency services, are provided to youth with these discharge outcomes.

Many youth leave care by running away, but there is a very limited understanding of the characteristics of these youths, the reasons they run, or how to reduce running behavior. At some point, many youth who run away reunify with their birth families on their own.

Give greater attention to youth who exit foster care by running away.

Anticipate that youth who run away from foster care may return to family and engage birth family in resolving issues that may continue to place youth at risk should they return home.

Develop services for youth who have engaged in running-away behaviors in order to reduce those behaviors.

Family Permanence for Youth in Foster Care / Family Permanence and Placement Factors

Key Themes

Recommendations for Policymakers and Advocates

Placement instability undermines family permanence for youth in foster care.

Minimize placement disruptions by focusing on the placement of youth with kin whenever possible, providing youth with needed mental health services, and supporting the kinship and foster families with whom youth live.

Support youth's ongoing contacts with their birth families while they are in foster care.

Utilize services that hold the potential to stabilize youth's placements while they are in foster care, such as Multi-Dimensional Foster Care.

Youth placed in congregate care settings are less likely to achieve family permanence.

Place youth in congregate care only when this type of placement meets the individual needs of the youth.

Prioritize permanency planning and services for youth in congregate care. Involve youth's birth families and promote ongoing parent-youth contact.

A Focus on Family Permanency Practice

A range of basic practice steps can help ensure that possibilities for permanence be fully explored with each youth.

Have conversations with young people in care about the important adults in their lives who might be permanent resources for them.

Engage actively in "family search" efforts to identify family members who may be permanent resources for youth.

Develop services to support youth's connections with caring committed adults, irrespective of whether these relationships involve legal permanence.

Ensure that no youth exits foster care without a caring, committed adult in his or her life.

Family Permanence Through Reunification with Parents and Relatives

<p>Reunification is the most common permanency exit for older children and youth in foster care. Reunification reflects the core social values of respect for privacy and the integrity of the family institution.</p>	<p>View reunification as the preferred permanency option for children and youth in foster care.</p> <p>Place special emphasis on cases involving youth who are removed for the first time from their birth families and provide intensive time-limited reunification services.</p>
<p>The nature of reunification has not been studied carefully. For instance, the relative proportion of planned and unplanned self-reunification is not clear.</p>	<p>Support strong partnerships with families which focus on family strengths.</p>
<p>Planned reunification efforts are most successful with younger children and children placed for the first time.</p>	<p>Promote frequent parent-child visits and involve foster parents in the work with birth parents to build an alliance and to model parenting.</p>
<p>Reunification is the permanency exit most prone to system re-entry.</p>	<p>Identify and address the risks associated with reunification for all youth in care.</p> <p>Concurrently provide permanency and complementary evidence-informed treatment services, such as foster care and multi-systemic therapy.</p> <p>Actively consider reunification for the youth at the time of any placement move.</p> <p>Support reunification with the ongoing involvement of foster families following youth's return home.</p>
<p>Growing numbers of children and youth are cared for by kin when children and youth must enter foster care. Great numbers of young people are in care with kin outside the formal system.</p>	<p>Provide other post-reunification services and supports, including the coordination of services across systems (mental health, substance abuse treatment, and domestic violence) for parents.</p> <p>Provide the services and supports that youth and their kinship families need.</p> <p>Ensure that kin receive adequate financial supports when they care for their relative children while in foster care.</p> <p>Assist kin in maximizing the developmental potential of the children in their care.</p>
<p>Siblings represent key family connections and potential lifelong supports, regardless of reunification with caregivers.</p>	<p>Support and strengthen youth's connections with siblings by placing them together whenever possible, and when it is not possible, by ensuring siblings' ongoing contact.</p> <p>Vigorously explore ties to youth's siblings who are in and out of placement before the youth reaches 16 years of age.</p>
<p>Research suggests significant benefits for youth when permanence is achieved through kinship care, particularly when subsidized guardianship is available to kin families.</p>	<p>Conduct diligent searches for kin, both maternal and paternal, when youth enter foster care.</p> <p>Facilitate appropriate contact with kin throughout youth's stay in foster care.</p> <p>Make extensive use of subsidized guardianship as a permanency option for older children and youth.</p> <p>Streamline interstate placements with kin through the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children.</p>

Foster Families as Permanent Family Resources

Foster parents play a significant role as permanency resources for many older children and youth in foster care.

Recognize foster parents as potential permanent resources for youth.

Discuss with foster parents any concerns they have about legal permanence, including guardianship if adoption is ruled out, as well as the availability of resources, and casework services, and potential expenses, and how to address children's emotional and behavioral problems.

Ensure that foster parents have access to needed resources when they become permanent family for youth.

Family Permanence through Adoption

Questions remain as to how termination of parental rights and adoption can be most effectively used in achieving permanence for youth in foster care. The risk of creating legal orphans when parental rights are terminated without establishing a new legal parent, is troubling, just as is delaying termination of parental rights (TPR) until a permanent family is found. Research has not focused on identifying characteristics or conditions associated with either aggressive or delayed TPR.

Strengthen practice regarding decisions to seek termination of parental rights (TPR) when youth are older, particularly in relation to informing youth of this decision and explaining to parents that the agency, not the youth, has made this decision.

Carefully weigh the decision to proceed with termination of parental rights in light of the youth's developmental status and needs.

Support youth through the TPR process.

Adoption practices for youth are necessarily different from adoption practices for younger children.

Take into account the developmental status and needs of youth when providing adoption services.

Carefully prepare older children and youth for adoption.

Strengthen efforts to recruit and support adoptive families for older children and youth.

Identify potential permanency resources with youth prior to framing their role as "prospective adoptive parents."

Provide training for prospective adoptive parents on the developmental needs of older children and youth in foster care and assess parents' expectations regarding adoption of older children and youth.

Little attention has been given to the experiences and needs of youth whose parents' rights have been terminated but who have not been adopted.

Explore with youth their connections with their birth families and their interests in reconnecting with them following termination of parental rights.

Advocate for policies that respond to the needs of youth whose parents' rights have been terminated but who have not been adopted, such as reinstatement of parental rights under certain circumstances.

For many youth, permanence is "impermanent," that is, they return to foster care following reunification or their placements with kin or adoptive families disrupt.

Provide post-reunification, post-guardianship, and post-adoption services and supports.

Provide adequate financial subsidies for families who adopt or assume guardianship of youth from foster care.

Practices that Support System Reform Initiatives *Overarching Issues*

Key Themes

Key levers of policy and practice-change in the child welfare arena are legislative reform, class-action litigation and court mandates, and policy approaches that provide for the testing of innovative policies and programs.

Recommendations for Practitioners

Actively participate in evaluations of system reform initiatives in order to provide vital information on the extent to which these efforts impact permanency outcomes for youth.

Explore sources of funding that support innovative practice and corresponding evaluations.

Federal Policy

Data indicate that since the enactment of the Adoption and Safe Families Act, the total number of adoptions has increased and the number of children being reunified with their families has declined. There is extremely limited information, however, on the broader impact that federal policy reforms have on efforts to achieve and sustain family permanence for youth.

Participate in efforts to develop a clear understanding of how federal funds are being used for services that support and strengthen families, that is, services that prevent the need for children and youth to enter foster care and that support the safe reunification of children and youth with their families after they enter foster care.

Ensure the appropriate consideration of the permanency options of reunification and adoption in light of the developmental needs of older children and youth in foster care.

Much more can be learned from the Child and Family Services Reviews about permanency outcomes for older children and youth in foster care.

Fully utilize the Child and Family Services Reviews to develop a better understanding of permanency outcomes for older children and youth and to support the development of approaches to successfully achieve and sustain family permanence for youth.

Court Reform Initiatives

<p>The partnership between the courts and child welfare agencies needs to be strengthened in order to improve permanency outcomes for youth.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop strong collaborations with the courts in planning for, and achieving, permanence for youth in foster care. Clarify the respective roles and responsibilities of child welfare agencies and the courts. Share data about children and youth in foster care with the courts, in compliance with applicable protections. Develop clear guidelines regarding courts' periodic reviews of youth's cases and their approval of key child welfare decisions. Implement cross-training for court and child welfare staff members. Provide courts with information on child and youth development and the services that children and youth need. Engage in efforts implemented by the Court Improvement Project in the state. Ensure the involvement of youth in their court proceedings and in court-training and system-reform efforts. Coordinate with the courts to effectively meet the needs of youth who are involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.
<p>Judicial policies and practices must be strengthened to ensure that courts are able to make fully informed and timely decisions for youth in foster care.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work collaboratively with the courts to ensure that the voices of youth are heard in their own court proceedings. Participate in benchmark permanency hearings in which all parties (youth, the judge, and supportive adults) come together in the courtroom to discuss youth's plans and goals, and the services and skills that the youth needs. Support "no continuance" policies, time-certain docketing, and other policies that support timely judicial decision making. Support and participate in alternative dispute resolution processes, such as mediation, to expedite permanency decision making. Work with the courts to improve the representation of youth, parents, and child welfare agencies in court proceedings.

Essential Promising Practice Strategies

Key Themes

Recommendations for Practitioners

Practice must focus on expanding and improving front-end services to prevent children from entering foster care whenever possible.

Develop programs that build on the success of the Homebuilders model from the Institute of Family Development, in lowering the incidence of child abuse and neglect and reducing the number of children who must be removed from their families.

Utilize processes, such as team decision making, that involve youth, parents, other supporting adults, and community partners in meetings with child welfare professionals to make decisions as to whether a child should be placed in foster care.

Family-involvement meetings appear to play an important role in supporting better permanency outcomes for youth in foster care and their families.

Convene family-involvement meetings and invite family members, community members, and service providers to discuss the issues that brought the family to the attention of the child welfare agency. Develop plans to meet the safety, well-being, and permanency needs of youth.

Include youth in all family-involvement meetings, absent strong reasons to the contrary.

Actively engage youth in the discussion and planning process.

Provide youth with advocates or “support persons.”

Focus on the quality of the family-involvement process: how the work is being done.

Continue to translate intuitive ideas of family involvement into specific practice methods.

Explore how to fit good family-involvement practice into the agency and community context, the needs of families at different stages of the work, and the culture of the youth and family.

Experience suggests that better outcomes for youth will be achieved when the child welfare agency has strong relationships with the communities from which youth come.

Recognize the role of community engagement in supporting and strengthening families.

Build bridges with the communities from which families and youth come, with a focus on community supports and resources that can be mobilized to prevent the need for youth to enter foster care.

Build and nurture cross-system collaborations that include community-based programs.

Train child welfare practitioners who work with older children and youth in community development.

Strengthen efforts to identify and engage religious resources in the community.

In many communities, services and supports are extremely limited for parents and for kin who informally assume responsibility for the care of their relative children.

Recognize the unmet service and support needs of parents and kin caregivers.

Work closely with community partners to enhance the services and supports that parents and kin caregivers need.

Practice-Research Collaborations

Because of limitations in national child welfare databases, data do not permit a determination of whether youth have actually achieved and sustained legal and social permanence. Many agencies have little or no access to information concerning their aggregate outcomes.

Advocate for efforts to establish the data elements that are needed to provide a clearer understanding of the youth in foster care and their experiences while in, and after leaving, foster care.

Advocate for the collection of national and local data on permanence and other outcomes for youth in foster care.

Researchers and practitioners are critical partners in designing research and evaluation efforts that will contribute to a stronger understanding of how to advance successful and sustained family connections for youth in foster care.

Collaborate on the design of mixed research methods that include both quantitative and qualitative research that features the voices of youth.

Work together to develop improved methods and instrumentation for tracking progress and outcomes for youth in foster care over time and for measuring program implementation and fidelity.

Explore innovative models to move toward evidence-based practice.

It is important to carefully design and replicate research in order to gain a better understanding of ways to both achieve and sustain family permanence and other key outcomes for youth in foster care.

Recognize the need for evidence-based practice.

Develop partnerships and seek opportunities to participate in benchmarking and other research collaborations to learn from practices.

Support well-designed studies that focus on outcomes for youth in foster care.

Section III:

Recommendations for the Child Welfare Research Community

The Permanency Needs of Youth in Foster Care

Key Themes

Family permanence for youth is a complex concept that encompasses legal status, geographic location, and social connections. The focus has primarily been on legal permanence and physical stability. Less attention has been given to emotional security or the social aspects of permanence.

Because of limitations in national child welfare databases, data do not permit a determination of whether youth have actually achieved and sustained legal permanence or have in place a network of supportive family or family-like relationships.

There is a limited understanding of the permanency needs of different populations of youth in foster care and the strengths that youth bring to planning and achieving permanence.

Recommendations for Research

Conduct research to enhance the understanding of emotional security and youth's emotional connections within relationships.

Investigate the implications of the foster care experience on adolescents' social functioning and identity formation, particularly as these processes affect permanence.

Identify the protective factors associated with the success of youth in foster care.

Test new approaches to the collection of national data that will permit the collection of data on permanency outcomes, as well as other outcomes, for youth in foster care.

Capture data on whether youth have achieved legal permanence or have in place a network of supportive family or family-like relationships.

Describe the permanency experiences of different populations of youth in foster care, including youth of color; gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and intersexed (GLBTQI) youth; and youth involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

Explore and describe the strengths of youth in planning for and meeting their permanency needs, including the factors associated with youth resilience.

Permanence and Preparation for Adulthood *Overarching Issues*

Key Themes

Permanence and preparation for adulthood should be fully integrated: Family permanence must be sought for all youth in foster care. Irrespective of their permanency goals, all youth in foster care, must be prepared for adulthood.

The active involvement of youth in permanency planning and preparation for adulthood is critical to successful outcomes.

Permanence and preparation-for-adulthood services must be developed and provided with an understanding of the disproportionate representation of children and youth of color in foster care and the disparate outcomes that historically have been achieved for these children and youth.

Recommendations for Research

Examine the specific organizational, programmatic, practice, and policy factors that support the full integration of permanence and preparation for adulthood.

Assess the outcomes for youth who receive fully integrated permanency and preparation services and those who receive only preparation for adulthood services. Compare outcomes for youth who leave foster care without family and/or significant adult connections and youth who leave care with these relationships.

Study how youth's family relationships can best be built and/or maintained, and how family can best be supported in preparing youth for adulthood.

Test youth-engagement strategies that promote youth's full involvement and ensure that their voices are heard in the permanency planning and preparation for adulthood processes.

Examine approaches to fully integrating permanence and preparation for adulthood that provide culturally appropriate services in response to the needs and strengths of African-American, Latino, and Native-American youth and their families. Utilize this information to develop evidence-based practices that effectively address these youth's needs.

Preparation for Adulthood

Key Themes

Recommendations for Research

There is no conclusive systematic evidence of the effectiveness of independent living programs.

Rigorously evaluate independent living programs with a focus on identifying the elements of effective preparation programs. Investigate questions related to which services provide youth with survival skills, social skills, and economic independence.

Assess the effectiveness of independent living programs in meeting the needs of youth with behavioral and emotional difficulties.

Evaluations of independent living programs have primarily focused on skill development with little attention to youth's development of networks of supportive family or family-like relationships.

In evaluations of independent living programs, focus on the extent to which these programs successfully connect youth with family and/or other caring, committed adults; support their connections with key adults; and emphasize skills teaching in the context of family relationships.

Little is known about the impact of the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act.

Explore the use and impact of Chafee funds, including who is being served through the program, the array of services provided and used, how services are provided, whether services are tailored to the needs and interests of each youth, which youth are excluded from services, how families are supported, and the effectiveness of Chafee services in improving short- and long-term outcomes for youth.

Research demonstrates very poor outcomes in relation to physical and mental health, employment, housing, income, and safety outcomes for many youth who "age out" of foster care. More needs to be understood about the longer-term outcomes for youth who leave care through emancipation or "aging out."

Conduct ongoing longitudinal studies of the outcomes for youth following their exit from foster care, with a focus on the factors that predict success or lack of success, particularly the impact of having connections to family and/or other key resource people in the youth's life.

Examine the outcomes for youth who leave care from different placement settings: living with kin, living with non-kin, and congregate care.

Assess the impact of the Medicaid extension program (Medicaid coverage through age 21 for youth who emancipate from foster care): how states are using this program, the rate of youth's utilization of services, and the effects of this program on youth's health outcomes.

Little is known about youth who exit foster care to other service systems.

Determine the characteristics of youth who exit foster care to the mental health, juvenile/criminal justice, and other service systems, and the extent to which child welfare services, particularly family permanency services, are provided to youth with these discharge outcomes.

Many youth leave care by running away, but there is a very limited understanding of the characteristics of these youths, the reasons they run, or how to reduce running behavior.

Describe the experiences of youth who run away from foster care, including the characteristics of youth who run, their pre-running behaviors, the risk factors associated with running, youth's reasons for running, to whom youth run, the services that these youth receive, placement options for these youth, and services that are effective in preventing running.

Family Permanence for Youth in Foster Care / Family Permanence and Placement Factors

Key Themes

Recommendations for Research

Placement instability undermines achieving family permanence for youth in foster care.

Examine the impact of placement moves on youth's connections with their birth families.

Identify and assess the services that hold the potential to stabilize youth's placements while they are in foster care, such as Multi-Dimensional Foster Care, and strengthen the understanding of evidence-based practices that promote placement stability.

Test cost-effective strategies regarding placement stability and conduct cost-benefit analyses that can underscore the value of placement stability for society.

States vary in their use of congregate care, and there is ample concern that it is overused for youth who would be better served in family placements.

Investigate the factors that are associated with the appropriate use of congregate care as a placement resource for youth.

Youth placed in congregate care settings are less likely to achieve family permanence.

Assess practices and approaches that promote the achievement of family permanence for youth who are appropriately placed in congregate-care settings.

Study the impact of reducing reliance on congregate care on the achievement of family permanence.

Family Permanence through Reunification with Parents and Relatives

The focus of research has been less on the value of youth's family and family-like relationships and more on concrete outcomes such as high school graduation rates and economic self-sufficiency.

Incorporate the value of family integrity in supporting positive outcomes for youth into studies that compare outcomes for different groups of youth (youth who are reunified, adopted, or exit care through emancipation). Place emphasis on family relationships as well as on the achievement of concrete educational, economic, and other outcomes.

Although a few studies have focused on reunification of youth with their birth families, much more needs to be understood about successful reunification approaches.

Identify and evaluate models of reunification with youth, including youth who reunify at earlier ages and youth who reunify at older ages, in order to strengthen the use of evidence-based reunification practice.

Study post-reunification supports and other factors associated with post-reunification success and stability.

Growing numbers of children and youth are cared for by kin when children and youth must enter foster care.

Study the experiences of youth and their kinship families, including the advantages and disadvantages of rearing youth in kin settings.

Research suggests significant benefits for youth when permanence is achieved through kinship care, particularly when subsidized guardianship is available to kin families.

Build on the current body of research that has demonstrated that subsidized guardianship provides a strong permanency option for youth and their kin caregivers.

Rigorously evaluate the impact of different approaches to subsidized guardianship in achieving and sustaining permanence for youth.

Family Permanence through Adoption

Questions remain as to how termination of parental rights and adoption can be used most effectively in achieving permanence for youth in foster care.

Investigate practice approaches that support the consideration of termination of parental rights (TPR) and adoption as a permanency option for older children and youth.

More research is needed on effective adoption practices in connection with permanency planning for youth in foster care.

Study the following issues related to the adoption of youth in foster care: effective family recruitment strategies and the impact of different recruitment initiatives; the characteristics of adoptive families who can successfully parent youth; outcomes of general, kinship, and foster-parent adoptions; outcomes for minority youth placed in transracial families; open adoption outcomes for youth adopted from foster care; adoption outcomes for GLBTQI youth; and adjustment challenges for adopted youth.

Little attention has been given to the experiences and needs of youth whose parents' rights have been terminated but who have not been adopted.

Assess current TPR practice from a developmental perspective, taking into account the different developmental needs of youth compared to the needs of younger children.

Identify and evaluate approaches that are effective in reconnecting youth with their parents following termination of parental rights, strengthening evidence-based practice in this area.

Sustaining Family Permanence

For many youth, permanence is "impermanent," that is, they return to foster care following reunification or their placements with kin or adoptive families disrupt. Data systems, however, are not well configured to provide a clear picture of these outcomes.

Study the impact of "impermanent" permanence on youth's behavior and adjustment.

Examine the effectiveness of ongoing permanency planning efforts with youth for whom initial permanency efforts have not been successful.

Test the effectiveness and cost/benefit of post-permanency services.

Policy Issues

Key Themes

Recommendations for Research

Key levers of policy change in the child welfare arena are legislative reform, class-action litigation and court mandates, and policy approaches that provide for the testing of innovative policies and programs.

Investigate the impact of different strategies in successfully instituting lasting child welfare reform, including studies that examine the impact of federal and state legislative reforms and class-action litigation that results in judicially-mandated and systems-wide child welfare reforms.

Document the benefits of the Title IV-E waiver demonstration program in testing out innovative child welfare policies and practices.

Data indicate that since the enactment of the Adoption and Safe Families Act, the total number of adoptions has increased and the number of children being reunified with their families has declined. There is extremely limited information, however, on the broader impact of federal policy reforms on efforts to achieve and sustain family permanence for youth.

Study the use of federal funds for services that support and strengthen families, that is, services that prevent the need for children and youth to enter foster care and that support the safe reunification of children and youth with their families after they enter foster care.

Evaluate the impact of provisions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act on achieving and sustaining family permanence for youth, including the effects of the reunification bypass provision and the adoption incentive program on achieving and sustaining family permanence for youth.

Assess the provisions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act and other federal laws from a developmental perspective, with a focus on the impact of these laws on achieving and sustaining permanence for older children and youth in foster care.

Much remains to be learned about the impact of court reform efforts on improving permanency outcomes for youth.

Continue to conduct rigorous evaluations of the dependency court reform process, with greater attention to youth dependency issues within the context of judicial system performance.

Undertake in-depth studies of court reform models, particularly regarding their responsiveness to family permanence for youth, in order to strengthen evidence-based practices in the judicial arena.

Incorporate national court performance measures into research projects that involve court processes and outcomes.

Assess approaches that promote court-child welfare coordination and collaboration, including cross-training programs.

Practice Strategies

Key Themes

Recommendations for Research

Studies indicate that family involvement meetings are viewed favorably by families and practitioners. The evidence, however, is not yet sufficient to validate the intuitive understanding that these meetings contribute to better permanency outcomes for youth in foster care and their families.

Study family-involvement meetings and the outcomes achieved. Explore the impact of practice variations, including attendance, facilitator training, the purpose and timing of meetings, and preparation time for these meetings.

Evaluate the use and effectiveness of family-involvement meetings with youth in care, including an assessment of what approaches work best for which families.

Integrate a developmental sensitivity in the assessment of family-involvement approaches, recognizing that the nature of each youth's participation in these approaches will vary depending on age, developmental status, and other factors.

Evaluate family-involvement meeting approaches with regard to cultural competence, with a testing of cultural adjustments against regular practice.

Experience suggests that better outcomes for youth will be achieved when the child welfare agency has strong relationships with the communities from which youth come.

Examine the role of community engagement in supporting and strengthening families on an informal basis and the extent to which these approaches can effectively reduce the need for children and youth to enter foster care; support the reintegration of foster youth into their families and communities.

Assess the effectiveness of different child welfare agency outreach and community-engagement strategies in relation to achieving and sustaining family permanence for youth in foster care.

Greater attention needs to be paid to developing community supports and services for parents and informal kin caregivers so that foster care entry can be avoided whenever possible.

Develop a stronger understanding of the role of informal caregivers in preventing the need for their relative children to enter foster care, documenting the benefits of informal kinship care to children and families and the cost savings to the child welfare system.

Build on the strong body of research that has identified the unmet service and support needs of parents and informal kin caregivers and effective approaches to meeting those needs.

Develop evidence-based practices that effectively meet the needs of informal kin caregivers.

Stronger collaborations are needed between child welfare agencies and communities to strengthen prevention services and supports, and to meet the needs of parents and kin caregivers when children and youth leave foster care to return to their families.

Explore practices and strategies that can be used by child welfare agencies, in collaboration with community partners, to enhance the services and supports that parents and kin caregivers need.

Characteristics of Ongoing Research

Key Themes

It is important to carefully design and replicate research to achieve a better understanding of how to best achieve and sustain family permanence and other key outcomes for youth in foster care.

Recommendations for Research

Use mixed research methods, including both quantitative and qualitative research that features the voices of youth.

Replicate well-designed studies that have focused on outcomes for youth in foster care so that studies use the same measures and deepen the current knowledge base.

Develop improved methods and instrumentation for tracking progress and outcomes for youth in foster care over time and for measuring program implementation and fidelity.

Explore innovative models to move toward evidence-based practice.

Continue to conduct longitudinal studies of youth in foster care.

CONCLUSION

Research is needed to inform policy and practice, but the reality is that policymakers and practitioners must often act without the benefit of rigorously designed research. As the themes from the Research Roundtable make clear, there are evidence-based practices that support family permanence for youth. These practices can guide how policymakers and practitioners move forward. However, research is needed in many critical areas to expand the understanding of what works in achieving and sustaining family permanence for older children and youth. By bringing together researchers, it is possible to clarify the vital role of research in addressing key child welfare policy and practice issues, and to develop a strong research agenda to promote family permanence for all children and youth in foster care.

PRESENTERS

The following presented at the Research Roundtable of the 2006 Convening on Youth Permanence:

Rosemary Avery, Professor and Chair, College of Human Ecology, Cornell University

Richard Barth, Dean, University of Maryland School of Social Work

Sandra Chipungu, Associate Professor, Morgan State University

Hewitt Clark, Professor, Department of Child and Family Studies, University of South Florida

Mark Courtney, Faculty Associate, Chapin Hall Center for Children, University of Chicago

David Crampton, Assistant Professor of Social Work, Case Western Reserve University

Gretta Cushing, Senior Research Associate, Casey Family Services/the Annie E. Casey Foundation

Laura Daugherty, Assistant Professor, National Catholic School of Social Service, Catholic University of America

Shirley Dobbin, Assistant Director, National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges

Karl Ensign, Senior Associate/Project Director, Learning and Planning Technologies, Inc.

Madelyn Freundlich, Excal Consulting Partners, LLC.

Robert Hill, Senior Researcher, Westat

Benjamin Kerman, Director of Research and Evaluation, Casey Family Services/the Annie E. Casey Foundation

Duncan Lindsey, Professor of Social Welfare, University of California School of Public Affairs

Anthony Maluccio, Professor Emeritus of Social Work, University of Connecticut, and Board of Advisors member, Casey Family Services/the Annie E. Casey Foundation

Penelope Maza, Senior Policy Research Analyst, U.S. Children's Bureau

Ruth McRoy, Research Professor, School of Social Work, University of Texas at Austin

Douglas W. Nelson, President, the Annie E. Casey Foundation

Peter Pecora, Senior Director of Research Services, Casey Family Programs

Joan Pennell, Professor and Department Head, Department of Social Work, North Carolina State University

Barbara Pine, Professor (retired), University of Connecticut

Aron Shlonsky, Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto

Robin Spath, Assistant Professor, University of Connecticut

Raymond L. Torres, Executive Director of Casey Family Services and Vice President, the Annie E. Casey Foundation

Fred Wulczyn, Research Fellow, Chapin Hall Center for Children, University of Chicago

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