



STRATEGY BRIEF

SAFE CHILDREN

What are some **effective strategies** for older youth adoption?

All children deserve a loving, supportive, and lifelong family. For that reason, foster care should serve only as a short-term, time-limited option focused on ensuring children return home safely to their parents or, if that is not possible, find a permanent home with relatives. On occasion, there are situations in which returning home or placement with relatives is not an option. In these cases, adoption into a new family can provide children and youth with the stability and sense of belonging they deserve.

We know what happens when youth age out of foster care without permanency. A plethora of [research](#) documents this system failure and its impacts, including homelessness, poverty, early pregnancy, and incarceration. But all children and youth are not provided with the same opportunities for permanency. Older youth in foster care (ages 12 and older) have the same need as infants, toddlers, and younger children: a safe and loving family that will support them into adulthood. Yet older youth in foster care are less likely to be returned to their birth family or be adopted into a new family. For older youth of color, the data is even more striking. Both Black and American Indian/Alaska Native youth were overrepresented among 12- to 18-year-olds waiting to be adopted as of Sept. 30, 2018: 23% percent were Black (compared to 15% of the general population) and 2% were American Indian/Alaska Native (double their population rate of 1%).¹

The challenges to older youth adoption are well documented² and include a shortage of prospective families, as many potential adoptive parents are looking



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to adopt infants and younger children. Older youth may not seem interested in guardianship or adoption, as they perceive it as betraying their birth families. [Research](#) in adolescent brain development reveals that many youth in foster care experience a profound sense of loss that may prevent them from being open to relationships with a new family. There also may be systemic issues at play, such as agency policies that do not fully encourage permanency for older youth, a lack of equitable supports for guardianship and adoption as compared to foster care stipends and services, or a culture in which staff do not believe that older youth are adoptable.

Many jurisdictions are having success improving the rate of adoption for older youth. The following strategies were drawn from multiple literature³ and conversations with several jurisdictions⁴ experiencing higher rates of older youth adoption, particularly for older youth of color, than the national average.

Youth-driven permanency

When returning home is not an option, the best place to start planning for permanency, whether guardianship or adoption, is [urgent and consistent engagement with the youth themselves](#). Caseworkers should have candid and ongoing discussions with youth about the importance of permanency, and foster a safe space where youth feel comfortable to express ideas and concerns. Youth need to understand the different permanency options and the pros and cons of each one. They may show initial or even long-term resistance to permanency planning that involves the termination of their birth parents' rights because of their natural emotional ties to their families, or they may crave independence, given their developmental stage. As such, it is essential not to start the conversation with guardianship or adoption, given the potential negative connotations for youth, but rather to lead with the importance of having lifelong, supportive relationships. Once that foundation is established, caseworkers can begin to explore the youth's openness to guardianship or adoption.

It also is important to engage youth directly in recruitment efforts so they feel a sense of control over their future. The **Northwest Adoption Exchange**

OLDER YOUTH ADOPTION RESEARCH

Key components of the Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK) model are establishing one-on-one relationships with youth, diligent searches for potential adoptive families, and persistent follow-up with identified contacts. A 2011 [study](#) using randomized control trials compared youth who received WWK services to those receiving traditional adoption services. The research found that older youth served by the WWK program were **three times more likely** to be adopted than those not served by WWK.

in Washington utilizes a youth-driven strategy, empowering youth to tell their story — via video posted on social media — in a way that honors their experiences and celebrates their potential. Rather than adults asking them questions, the youth is empowered to decide what they want to express about themselves. In addition, rather than posting youth profiles for prospective adoptive parents to review, or hosting an adoption fair, youth attend an event where the profiles of potential adoptive parents are displayed around the room and the youth can select which families they want to learn more about. The families are not present but social workers are there to answer any questions.

Utilize family search and engagement

Many older youth have been in foster care for an extended period of time and may have lost connections they once had with kin. [Family search and engagement](#) strategies aim to locate and connect relatives and other important adults who can provide permanent homes, or caring lifelong support networks. While search and engagement approaches vary, they typically begin with an intensive search by interviewing the youth and birth parents to identify existing familial connections that may provide a placement or ongoing support. If these efforts do not yield relatives, more intensive activities using search engines, government databases, social media, and emergency school contacts should follow. Strategies to locate and identify fit and willing relatives and other meaningful adults include notices

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RELATIONAL PERMANENCY

While legal permanency remains the top priority for older youth in foster care, in recent years relational permanency has been recognized as being equally important. Relational permanency is a formal but non-legal establishment of a lifelong connection to caring adults, including at least one adult who will provide a permanent, parent-like connection. It is critical that agencies continue to engage with youth to identify these connections while simultaneously working toward legal permanency.

Foster Club's [Permanency Pact](#) is a relational permanency planning tool to help youth and supportive adults establish, define, and maintain a relationship that is supportive for the youth. To establish a Permanency Pact, a facilitator, such as a caseworker, helps the youth identify adults they would like to have in their support system. The facilitator then guides the process of expanding the youth's support system, which includes making contact with identified adults, facilitating conversations between the youth and adult, and helping establish a written pact. If agencies want to measure the relational permanency of youth, they can use the [Youth Connections Scale](#), which is designed for the youth and caseworker to complete.

to known relatives, database and records searches, and intensive models, such as 30 Days to Family, Extreme Recruitment, and Family Finding. For many of these models, specialized workers conduct the family searches.

In 2016, the **Arizona Department of Child Safety** implemented the Fostering Sustainable Connections program to reconnect youth in congregate care settings to their kin and other personal connections. Youth are prioritized based on the length of time they have

been in congregate care. For youth who cannot be reunified, a family engagement specialist is assigned to work with them and their caseworker. The specialists engage youth in a conversation about what family means to them, then help them identify available and potential family connections. Specialists use formal search technologies, family engagement strategies, and other creative methods of locating and working with biological family members and other important adults. After identifying connections, they hold a Life Long Connections meeting, modeled after Team Decision Making, in which everyone comes together to identify a kin placement and create a permanency action plan. Once the youth is placed with kin, a key component of the intervention is to ensure formal and natural supports are in place going forward.

Kinship adoption

Child protection agencies should present adoption as an important permanency option for those families in which reunification or guardianship may not be possible, and continue to revisit those conversations regularly. While some relatives may be reluctant to adopt the child of a family member where parental rights will be terminated, in many instances, they can be supported to pursue open adoption. In some instances, the barrier to adoption by kin is a lack of information, so agencies must take steps to provide clear, accessible details regarding the options available. Relatives can make the decision that is right for them once they understand the legal, emotional, and financial benefits and considerations for each permanency avenue.

In **San Francisco County, California**, assigned protective services workers (PSWs) will participate in initial and ongoing discussions with kinship caregivers about their permanency options. The workers' role is not to persuade the caregiver to pursue either adoption or legal guardianship, but rather to provide information on the pros and cons of either option in a neutral way. They also inform kinship caregivers of the importance of legal permanency in order to highlight the positive impact that it can have on a youth's sense of unconditional belonging. PSWs often bring in adoption caseworkers to answer any specific questions about

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kinship adoption, and consult with the caregiver on any hesitations they may have about terminating parental rights and provide solutions, such as open adoption, that can mitigate those concerns.

Community-based recruitment

While the permanency preference for older youth is always reunification with parents or legal permanency with relatives, there are occasions when that is not possible and non-relative adoption is the best option. In those situations, it is preferable for the child to be adopted by families that live in the youth's community. Research shows that maintaining a strong cultural identity can lead to greater self-esteem, improved coping abilities, decreased levels of loneliness and depression, and higher levels of social well-being.⁵ Youth who remain in their communities can keep ties with their culture, friends, and relatives, and stay connected to school and other activities. Geo-mapping and [market segmentation](#) are strategies that can help agencies better understand the communities where they should concentrate their adoption recruitment efforts. Another strategy includes partnerships with local businesses and faith-based institutions with deep roots in the community.

In **Texas**, the [Advisory Committee on Promoting Adoption of Minority Children](#) focuses on system enhancements to promote adoptions for older youth of color. One of its strategies is to target recruitment in [ZIP codes](#) with the highest rates of children in foster care so that youth can remain in their communities. Members of the committee, in partnership with the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services' [Faith-Based Program](#), reach out to institutions of all faith denominations and community based organizations to recruit resource families and potential adoptive parents for children of color. Many of the committee members are kinship and adoptive parents themselves and can speak to their positive experiences with older youth adoption; they also provide awareness for events community forums for prospective adoptive parents of older youth. Committee members also provide supports for the foster and adoptive parents in their congregations, and within the community, such as respite care and concrete supports, to prevent adoption and placement disruptions.

Caseworker support

Past research⁶ supports the claim that caseworkers' attitudes and perspectives can influence whether a child is adopted, so a key strategy can be to recruit caseworkers who believe there is a family out there for every child, no matter the age. Many older youth change placements multiple times and therefore may have trauma and/or attachment issues. These cases tend to be more complex and require intensive time by staff to work with the child and ensure that potential adoptive parents are properly prepared. Agencies should train staff on adolescent brain development, the impact of attachment when placement are repeatedly disrupted, best practices to serve older youth, and provide quality supervision support. Caseloads must be manageable, with supports in place to allow caseworkers to have a continued focus on finding families for all older youth on their caseload.

Some agencies have created specialized permanency units for older youth. In **Lake County, Indiana**, a Length of Involvement unit was created for older youth who had been in the system the longest. The agency recruits case managers who are committed to permanency for older youth and willing to be creative. Caseloads are smaller than traditional units so that case managers can work closely with the youth and family, and the unit members routinely come together to collectively develop innovative strategies to support permanency. In addition to support for individual cases, systemic barriers to adoption and other permanency options are identified and shared with agency leadership. This feedback loop allows for continuous quality improvement within the unit and across the system.

Adoption support and preservation services

The support of the child protection agency is far from over once the guardianship or adoption is finalized. In fact, [research](#) shows that the needs of youth and their families post-permanency often emerge over time. For older youth who have been in foster care for much of their lives and experienced many placements, adoption actually can be destabilizing. It is critical that services address the effects that separation, loss, and trauma can have on older youth, and fully prepare families. Families need access to service providers that are familiar with

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the dynamics involved in adoption and will help them meet their children's needs — which can change over time — and address new issues as they emerge. Most importantly, these services need to be offered before a crisis hits, at [key intervals along a continuum](#), and be available at any time after the adoption.

Indiana's adoption support and preservation services are put in place as soon as possible. Services begin with a comprehensive strengths-based assessment with the youth and family. The service provider then convenes a team to include other family members, informal supports, and professionals to form a collaborative plan of care with clearly defined goals. The provider maintains ongoing dialogue with the family and its team to see that care is consistent and progress is being made toward the goals. The plan of care may include assistance in connecting with other community resources, behavioral health care services, respite care, and support groups.

Additional resources

For more information, a selection of organizations that provide resources on older youth adoption strategies are listed below.

- [AdoptUSKids](#)
- [CHAMPS: Children Need Amazing Parents](#)
- [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#)
- [The Center for Adoption Support and Education](#)
- [National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment](#)
- [North American Council on Adoptable Children](#)
- [Quality Improvement Center for Adoption & Guardianship Support and Preservation](#)
- [Wendy's Wonderful Kids](#)

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

- 1 Data from the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect Data, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, analyzed by Casey Family Programs staff on August 6, 2020.
- 2 Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2019). Promoting permanency for older youth in out-of-home care. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from: https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/bulletins_permanency.pdf
- 3 Boo, M. (2010). *Successful older child adoption: Lessons from the field*. St. Paul, MN: North American Council on Adoptable Children. Retrieved from: <https://www.nacac.org/resource/adoption-teens-family-recruiting/>; Children need amazing parents (CHAMPS). (2020). *Analysis of State 2020-2024 Foster and Adoptive Parent Diligent Recruitment Plans*. Retrieved from: https://fosteringchamps.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CHAMPS_DR-Plan-Analysis-and-Report_Final.pdf; Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2019). *Promoting permanency for older youth in out-of-home care*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from: https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/bulletins_permanency.pdf; National Center for Youth Law. (2018). *Promoting permanency for teens: A 50 state review of law and policy*. Retrieved from: <https://youthlaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Promoting-Permanency-for-Teens.pdf>; and National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment. (2015). *Going beyond recruitment for older youth adoption*. Retrieved from: <https://adoptuskids.org/assets/files/NRCRD-org/going-beyond-recruitment-for-older-youth.pdf>
- 4 The information in this brief is based in part on the following interviews with child welfare agency staff from: Arizona Department of Child Safety on August 1, 2020; Lake County, Indiana, Department of Child Services, on June 23, 2020; San Francisco County Human Services Association on July 31, 2020; and Texas Department of Family and Protective Services on July 6, 2020.
- 5 Anderson, M., & L.O. Linares. (2012). The role of cultural dissimilarity factors on child adjustment following foster placement. *Children and Youth Services Review* 34(4), 597-601; Osborne, E. & D. Taylor. (2010). The role of cultural identity clarity for self-concept clarity, self-esteem, and subjective well-being. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 36(7), 883-897.
- 6 Avery, R. J. (2000). Perceptions and practice: Agency efforts for the hardest-to-place children. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 22, 399-420; Carnochan S, Moore M, Austin MJ. (2013). Achieving timely adoption. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, 10(3), 2010-219.

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