

The Role of Leaders in Engaging Youth and Families to Achieve Timely Permanency for Children and Youth Waiting to Be Adopted



Capacity Building
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Over 120,000 children and youth in the United States are still awaiting permanency (Children’s Bureau, 2020). Authentically engaging youth and families in individual permanency plans, as well as in broader systemic efforts, can help child welfare agencies improve practice and outcomes. Authentic engagement reflects “active, ongoing collaboration of youth, families, and other stakeholders with the child welfare system in a way that recognizes them as equal partners in achieving practice and system change” (Capacity Building Center for States, 2019, p. 6). Like much of a child welfare agency’s work, engagement happens along a continuum, in which there is always room to strive for better outcomes.

Building Organizational Culture for Authentic Engagement

To successfully achieve permanency outcomes, child welfare agencies must embrace a permanency-driven culture of youth and family engagement. Leaders set the value, tone, and structure to support authentic engagement, integrated into and embedded throughout all levels of the agency and the broader child welfare system. While systems-change work happens over time, there are immediate and incremental steps that agencies and staff can take to increase engagement.

Develop a Culture of Curiosity

A “culture of curiosity” encourages questions. This culture takes root when staff at every level of an organization continue to dig deeper and ask themselves, “What could I have done differently or better to achieve permanency for more children and youth? What can I learn from youth and families about what we should do differently? What kinds of formal opportunities (board membership, employment) are there for families to share in decision-making? What are community supports that could improve permanency? How can I sit with potential discomfort and not only listen, but work in partnership with youth and families to drive change in policy and practice?”

Successful approaches are driven by leaders who empower and expect all staff, including themselves, to actively seek information from and tap into the expertise of a wide range of youth and families, using their feedback to affect individual, programmatic, and systemic change. Leaders play a key role in encouraging a culture of curiosity through modeling and celebrating curiosity in action.

Prioritize Engagement Through Intentional Action

While engagement takes time and effort, the benefits are substantial. Youth and families are in a unique position to highlight effective and ineffective strategies, share innovative ideas, provide context and feedback that reflects the needs of communities served by the agency, and promote both accountability and transparency (Capacity Building Center for States, 2019).

Agency leaders demonstrate that engagement is a priority when they:

Read this to:

- ▶ Learn about building and embedding a culture for authentic youth and family engagement in your agency
- ▶ Get tips for engaging youth and families in:
 - System-level permanency initiatives
 - Individual permanency planning
- ▶ Find tools you can share with supervisors and caseworkers to strengthen engagement in individual permanency planning
- ▶ Explore state examples, best practices, and additional resources for engaging youth and families to achieve timely permanency for children and youth waiting to be adopted

Tip: Explore the [five dimensions of organizational capacity](#) and consider what your agency needs to successfully build capacity for a permanency-driven culture of youth and family engagement.

- ▶ Actively encourage courageous conversations with youth and families
- ▶ Allow for time and coaching for frontline workers to build meaningful relationships
- ▶ Integrate expectations for engagement into position descriptions and performance evaluations

Leaders seeking to make the case for allocating resources and funding for staff time may want to assess the costs associated with current placement and permanency options for older youth waiting to be adopted, the outcomes for youth who transition out of the child welfare system without receiving permanency, and the agency’s current progress on achieving outcomes on federal permanency standards. In addition to arguments that make a financial case by illustrating the costs associated with long-term congregate care placements, for example, agencies can provide opportunities for youth and families to share their expertise directly with decision-makers.

Embedding Organizational Values Into Practice

Authentic engagement to achieve timely permanency for children and youth waiting to be adopted requires youth and family engagement at the system or agency level, as well as the individual level. There are key roles for agency leaders, managers, supervisors, and caseworkers within each of those levels. For example, leaders and managers may mobilize system- or agency-level permanency efforts, while supervisors and caseworkers may identify, reach out to, and prepare potential participants. Caseworkers are responsible for engaging youth and families in individual permanency planning with support from their supervisors. That practice is made possible by agency leaders and managers who build the culture and ensure that sufficient staffing and training, along with continuous quality improvement and a commitment to sustainability, are in place.

The following sections will address the role of leaders in fostering engagement in system-level efforts and individual permanency planning and then offer examples of engagement in action.

Authentic Engagement in Agency and System-Level Permanency Efforts

The Center’s “Strategies for Authentic Integration of Youth and Family Voice in Child Welfare” publication highlights five key tasks of youth and family engagement in agency level efforts:

1. Identify and reach out to stakeholders
2. Level the playing field
3. Set the parameters for purposeful and actionable engagement
4. Make sure everyone stays informed
5. Provide feedback mechanisms

The following questions for consideration and tips for getting started can help you think about how these tasks of engagement apply to your agency and system-level permanency efforts. These represent only a few ideas to prompt thinking and are far from exhaustive. Consider working with internal permanency teams to review these questions and tips for getting started as you plan your approach.

Identify and Reach Out to Youth and Families

The following questions represent a few things to consider as you work to maximize youth and family engagement in permanency initiatives:

1. How can you intentionally invite youth who are representative of those your permanency initiative is intended to support? Consider the demographic profile (race, ethnicity, age, gender, and placement setting, for example) of youth waiting for permanency.
2. How and when are you reaching out to youth and families to ask for participation in permanency initiatives? How are youth and families engaged in all the agency’s permanency initiatives? How have you created opportunities for youth and families to help shape the process?
3. How are families identified for participation in agency and system permanency initiatives? Consider the importance of both relational and legal permanency, the different kinds of adults that play an important role in young people’s lives, and the importance of community connectedness to placement stability.

Getting Started

- ▶ Provide information about the permanency initiative, expectations for participation, necessary skills, and compensation with the invitation to participate.
- ▶ Ask staff or partners who have strong relationships with youth and family members to extend the invitation and field questions about the process.
- ▶ Invite youth and family members who have participated in (or are currently participating in) an individual permanency planning process, including those who have not received permanency.

Level the Playing Field

The following questions represent a few things to consider as you work to mitigate power differentials:

1. How do you understand and acknowledge the power differential between child welfare representatives and the youth and families they serve? How can you seek input from youth and families to develop a process that recognizes the historic and ongoing power imbalance and works to lessen it?
2. How does your permanency planning process reflect that child welfare staff value lived experience? How have you broadened your lens to include the expertise of youth under age 18? Are you limiting family participation to those you feel have reached a particular milestone (such as reunification or finalized adoption) or do you provide opportunities for all types of family expertise?
3. Are most participants in permanency efforts youth and family members or child welfare professionals? What would it look like if participants were evenly balanced or if professionals were outnumbered instead of youth and families?

Getting Started

- ▶ Ask youth and family members to help you co-create an inclusive permanency initiative process that feels valuable to them. Draft agendas together, take time to thoughtfully prepare, and ask for feedback at regular touchpoints.
- ▶ Provide several different ways for participants to provide input and feedback, including anonymously.
- ▶ Prepare other stakeholders for participation by describing the value your agency holds for lived expertise and the expectation that final plans will reflect the perspectives of youth and families.

Set the Parameters for Purposeful and Actionable Engagement

The following questions represent a few things to consider as you work to ensure a meaningful process:

1. What approaches do you use to prioritize the participation of youth and families when scheduling and hosting meetings?
2. How are youth and families invited to serve as co-creators or cofacilitators of your initiative? How could you provide them training, coaching, and compensation for facilitation?
3. Do you invite and encourage youth and families to share their expertise broadly or are they invited only to share their personal stories? Is their feedback and expertise prioritized and does it drive policy and practice change to improve permanency?
4. How can you solicit feedback that might be challenging to hear but could drive powerful change?

Getting Started

- ▶ Co-create goals and objectives for your permanency initiative in partnership with youth and family team members.
- ▶ Answer questions or concerns about confidentiality prior to participation.
- ▶ Elicit and prioritize youth and family feedback during meetings. Build time in the agenda to allow for multiple voices to be heard.
- ▶ Consider where and when meetings are held, as well as the provision of meals, child care, transportation, and compensation, in recognition of their time and expertise.

Make Sure Everyone Stays Informed

The following questions represent a few things to consider as you work to keep youth and family participants informed throughout your process:

1. How do you identify what type of communication works best for youth and families? How will you ensure individual outreach to each youth and family member to debrief and gather feedback after meetings?
2. How will you make sure that meeting materials are provided in advance in ways that are convenient for youth and families to access? What can you do to make sure that materials are easy to understand and engaging?
3. Youth and families may not be aware of internal agency decisions and priorities and how they impact permanency efforts. How can you provide consistent updates on any internal agency work that influences or informs the group's permanency planning efforts?

Getting Started

- ▶ Develop a communication plan that identifies preferred methods of communication and hold yourself accountable to following through.
- ▶ Keep materials in a central location that all team members can access.
- ▶ Identify a point of contact who is responsible for answering questions, providing clarification, being proactive in communicating with youth and family members, and offering context when needed.

Provide Feedback Mechanisms

The following questions represent a few things to consider as you work to prioritize youth and family feedback:

1. What would it look like to have clear and ongoing communication about how youth and family feedback has informed policy and practice?
2. How do you solicit feedback from a broad group of youth and families, including those who are not directly participating in the permanency initiative?
3. How do youth and families inform the initiative's evaluation?
4. How often are youth and families reconvened to review progress and refine recommendations based on outcomes?

Getting Started

- ▶ Track youth and family feedback and recommendations throughout the process and identify specific practice and policy changes that resulted.
- ▶ Debrief after the process to identify lessons learned and areas for improvement for engaging youth and families effectively in agency initiatives.
- ▶ Invite families and youth to participate in every phase of the initiative, from planning through implementation and evaluation.

Authentic Engagement in Individual Permanency Planning

Engagement at the individual level is more effective when agency leaders and community partners value, encourage, and expect family and youth involvement at every stage of the permanency process. Once the culture of engagement is established in the agency, it can be reinforced and sustained through training, coaching, supervision, and other supports for effective casework.

Leaders can ensure that the culture of engagement is both reinforced and sustained by supporting supervisors and teams and continually assessing opportunities to prioritize engagement through action.

Key Components of Engaging Youth and Families in Individual Permanency Planning

Youth consistently emphasize the importance of authentic engagement to achieve permanency, elevating the need for supportive and honest relationships with professionals who center them in a meaningful and intentional process (Administration for Children and Families Youth Engagement Team, 2020; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; Youth Fostering Change, 2018).

Consider how you and other staff, including supervisors, play a role in embedding the following components of practice into permanency casework.

Tip: Share "[Supervisor Toolkit: Engaging Youth and Families to Achieve Timely Permanency for Children and Youth Waiting to Be Adopted](#)" with your staff. The toolkit includes team activities and worksheets for caseworkers to use in supervision.

Build Trusting Relationships

1. What would it look like if caseloads were more manageable and caseworkers had the time to develop and nurture supportive relationships with youth and families? What could be changed about staff workloads and priorities to add time for prioritizing relationships as the foundation for permanency?
2. What are the expectations for staff as they begin talking with youth about permanency? How are staff encouraged and expected to follow the lead of youth, exploring resistance without pressuring youth to make a decision before they are ready?
3. How are supervisors building the capacity of their teams to build relationships with youth and families? How are they supporting their staff in overcoming barriers to authentic engagement and encouraging expanded use of effective engagement strategies?

Develop a Youth- and Family-Centered Permanency Process

1. How has your agency's work been informed by youth and families with lived expertise? What would individual case practice look like if your agency committed to ongoing partnership with youth and families, relying on their expertise to inform policy, programs, and practice?
2. What kind of training does your agency offer to support staff in youth and family engagement and empowerment, cultural humility, and culturally responsive practice?
3. How does your agency define permanency and how does that definition inform policy and practice? Is that definition informed by youth and family perspectives? Consider when conversations about permanency typically begin and when supports to youth and families end. Is every child and youth expected to receive permanency? Are post-permanency supports a routine part of your agency's work?

Lead Meaningful Permanency Meetings

1. What resources are available to support neutral third party facilitators in permanency meetings? What would it look like if this was standard practice?
2. How are staff supported and expected to co-create meeting agendas with youth and family members of their choosing?
3. How are youth and families prepared before each meeting? What opportunities do they have to debrief and provide feedback about the process? How is that feedback used to inform subsequent meetings (or the process as a whole)?

Examples of Engagement in Action

The following examples highlight the integration of specific permanency programs or models into state child welfare agency permanency efforts, the importance of engagement in each approach, and the value of public/private partnership to achieve goals.

California Department of Social Services

California Partnership Strengthens Capacity for Permanency Initiatives

Following [Continuum of Care Reform](#), a legislative reform effort designed to reduce the use of congregate care, the California Department of Social Services partnered with the National Institute for Permanent Family Connectedness and several public universities to spearhead the Active Supportive Intervention

Services for Transition (ASIST) program. ASIST, also referred to as Specialized Permanency, focuses on prevention of entry into and transitions from congregate care facilities, as well as finding permanency for children and youth with complex needs (D. Wilson, personal communication, June 25, 2021; California Department of Social Services, 2019).

Each local child welfare agency in California's county-administered system had the option to participate when ASIST first started in 2019. The agencies that opted in receive targeted resources and technical assistance to build capacity for permanency. ASIST supports "extensive family finding and engagement; specialized permanency services; child-specific, field-based training and coaching; system and program-level consultation; and in-home support through high-fidelity wraparound services or other intensive permanency focused support services" (University of California Davis, n.d.).

The County of San Luis Obispo Department of Social Services (SLO DSS) has participated in ASIST since February 2020. The agency has shifted practice through engagement of youth and families before, during, and after the identification of a youth's forever family. This is accomplished through involvement in Child and Family Team meetings, Family Finding as soon as a youth is at risk of imminent placement, and targeted ASIST services and staffing. These targeted services include specialized searching for family members, peer counseling, family therapy and support before, during, and after placement, flexible funding available to support the unique needs of each family, and frequent team meetings to review progress and identify action steps (A. Holmes, personal communication, July 8, 2021).

Since the program's inception, 84 percent of participating youth have stepped down from congregate care and 47 percent have achieved permanency. As part of a cost/benefit analysis, the agency found that two cases resulted in an annual county cost savings of \$124,000. This surpasses the entire allocation for all participating youth, resulting in substantial net savings (A. Holmes, personal communication, July 8, 2021).

As SLO DSS Deputy Director Linda Belch notes: "Not only do these successful outcomes provide a cost savings to the county, but the long-term benefit of moving these children out of a congregate setting to home-based care with family is immeasurable" (County of San Luis Obispo Department of Social Services, 2021).

Learn more about the [National Institute for Permanent Family Connectedness](#) and [ASIST/Specialized Permanency](#).

Kansas Department for Children and Families

Kansas Partnership Pairs Engagement With Exploration to Achieve Permanency

In 2020, the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF) partnered with FosterAdopt Connect to implement Extreme Family Finding™.

The Extreme Family Finding™ model pairs recruiters with private investigators to find permanency for youth at risk of aging out of foster care. The first third of the work involves concurrent child-specific family finding, targeted, and general recruitment. Extreme Family Finding™ teams dig deep into multiple databases and social media and meet with identified relatives, including those who have already been ruled out as adoptive resources. The approach shifts to engagement as a network of supportive adults are located, and the team begins working with children, youth, and families to support them throughout the process of legal and relational permanency.

In Kansas, a FosterAdopt Connect replication site houses teams of staff focused on locating family members, recruitment, and engagement. The public/private partnership offered DCF an opportunity for innovation and program replication that would not have been feasible with existing agency staffing and resources. In addition, starting in one region of the state and scaling up over time allowed for more successful, sustainable implementation.

During the pilot, 70 percent of youth were matched with permanency resources and 80 percent were connected to natural supports. Cumulatively, youths' family trees expanded by 943 relatives (M. Kline, personal communication, June 10, 2021).

Learn more about [Extreme Family Finding™](#).

Michigan Department of Health and Human Services

Michigan Partnership Turns to Youth Storytelling to Promote Permanency

In 2017, the Northwest Adoption Exchange (NWAEE) began producing “In-Depth Profiles,” creative storytelling projects developed in partnership with older youth in foster care.

Inspired by NWAEE’s “In-Depth Profile” model, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services partnered with AdoptUSKids, NWAEE, and the Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange (MARE), a contracted project of the Michigan-based Judson Center, to produce in-depth, self-directed profile projects with teens waiting to be adopted. Youth interested in developing these unique storytelling profiles can tell their own story, in a format of their choosing, sharing the most relevant information about themselves with potential adoptive families. Public-facing profiles are housed on the MARE website.

Authentic engagement and youth ownership of the story are at the heart of the process. Skilled adults work with youth, asking two core questions to guide creation of the profile: “What do you want to share with potential adoptive families, and how do you want to share it?” (Helbach, 2020).

Program results demonstrate the impact of “In-Depth Profiles.” Not only did family inquiries about specific youth increase by 200 percent, but 55 percent of youth who completed a project had either identified or been matched with an adoptive family within 6 months (M. Parra, personal communication, June 7, 2021).

Learn more about the [NWAEE](#) and [MARE](#) “In-Depth Profiles.”

Additional Resources

The following resources can support agencies looking for more information about youth engagement, family engagement, and achieving permanency for children and youth. Explore insights that support an agency culture of engagement and share resources directly with managers, supervisors, and staff.

Series

- ▶ [Menu for Youth Engagement](#)
- ▶ [Youth Engagement Blueprint](#)
- ▶ [Becoming a Family-Focused System](#)
- ▶ [National Foster Care Month](#) (Child Welfare Information Gateway)

Publications

- ▶ [ACF Youth Engagement Team: Recommendations for Improving Permanency and Well-Being](#) (Children’s Bureau)
- ▶ [Supervisor Toolkit: Engaging Youth and Families to Achieve Timely Permanency for Children and Youth Waiting to Be Adopted](#)
- ▶ [Strategies for Authentic Engagement of Youth and Family Voice in Child Welfare](#)
- ▶ [Belonging Matters – Helping Youth Explore Permanency](#), (AdoptUSKids/Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- ▶ [Talking With Older Youth About Adoption](#), (AdoptUSKids/Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- ▶ [Tools for Success: A Toolkit for Child Welfare Professionals to Achieve Permanency and Stability for Youth in Foster Care](#) (Youth Fostering Change/Juvenile Law Center)
- ▶ [Permanency: Cultural Awareness and Bias: Reducing Disproportionality and Disparity](#) (CASA Advocacy in Action)

Webinars

- ▶ [Engage Youth: Listen and Learn](#), (AdoptUSKids/Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- ▶ [Youth Voices: Why Family Matters](#), (AdoptUSKids/Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- ▶ [Engaging Youth in Writing Their Narratives](#), (AdoptUSKids)

Visit <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/achieving-permanency/engaging-partners/> to find this and other publications related to engaging partners to achieve timely permanency for children and youth waiting to be adopted.

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Users may freely print and distribute this material crediting the Capacity Building Center for States. Suggested citation: Capacity Building Center for States. (2021). *The role of leaders in engaging youth and families to achieve timely permanency for children and youth waiting to be adopted*. Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

This product was created by the Capacity Building Center for States under Contract No. HHSP2332015000711, funded by the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.