Developing Permanent, Supportive Connections While in Care:

Foster Youth's Perspectives

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Executive Summary

Young people age out of the foster care system at age 18 or 19 and are often left to their own devices to survive on their own in early adulthood. With the increasing research in the outcomes of youth aging out of foster care, it has become more apparent that former foster care youth may need more support in the areas of social support and permanent emotional connections with adults in their lives.

This youth-led study examines the effect of "permanency placement" and "permanent emotional connection" interventions on young people in foster care in the San Francisco Bay Area. The goal of the study is to examine the experiences of youth while they were in foster care, as told by the youth themselves. Data was collected through non-experimental qualitative interviews and focus groups with young adults that have aged out of the foster care system. Twenty-seven youth were recruited from three Bay Area counties: Alameda, Contra Costa and Santa Clara. Each county used for recruitment had either trained their child welfare workers in the California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP) model or the Family Finding model.

This is a seminal study in the field of child welfare as it explored the process, services, and support foster care youth received while in care with developing permanent emotional connections with adults in their lives. No other study to date has sought to gather feedback from the *youth themselves* about the process of receiving "permanency" services from their child welfare workers or agencies.

The qualitative data was analyzed and the major themes and topic areas that emerged from the data were: 1) The Importance of Developing Family and Permanent Connections, 2) Family Placement Options Were Not Discussed with the Youth, 3) Youth Not Wanting to be Placed with Family, 4) Preparation for Placement/Connections with Family or Other Adults, 5) Having a Choice with Placements or Contact with Family, 6) Connections to Siblings Who Were Also in Foster Care, 7) Multiple Placements Resulting in a Lack of Permanency, 8) Types of Placements Affecting Relational Permanency, 9) Mental Health Issues of Youth Can Affect Permanency, 10) Mentors in the Community as Permanent Connections, 11) Social Workers as Mentors and Permanent Adult Connections, 12) Hard to Create Permanency When Relationship with SW is Not Strong, and 13) Lack of Contact with Connections After Aging Out.

Most of the youth reported that they did not receive support from their child welfare workers about making connections to family or other adults while in care.

The following are the recommendations for child welfare agencies to take action on:

1. Implement Family and Permanent Connection Finding (FPCF) services for <u>all</u> youth in foster care not placed with kin, especially those youth over the age of 13
    a. Continuously train new child welfare workers, supervisors and managers on the importance of promoting family placements and helping youth develop permanent emotional connections with adults in care
    b. Run a family finding report on every youth in foster care (Weinberg, 2009)
    c. Social workers should add permanent connections to family (especially siblings) when making decisions about placements (especially out-of-county placements)
    d. Examine the cost-effectiveness of the Family Finding model to examine if it should be implemented within the county system, or be contracted out to a private non-profit
    e. Make sure <u>all</u> foster care youth have a voice in their placements with family and connections to adults while in care (when developmentally appropriate)
    f. Link youth with mentors in the community

    g. All FPCF services should offer pre- and post-planning interventions including support for relationship disruptions for at least one year after a connection is made
2. Add a “Permanent emotional connection” section to CWS/CMS for data tracking (perhaps in Special Project Tab area)
3. Mandate that siblings have the same social workers while in foster care
    a. Develop policy to state who is responsible for bringing siblings together for contact if they have different social workers
4. Conduct a longitudinal study* exploring the outcomes of the Family and Permanent Connection Finding model to examine:
    a. Kin placement rates and length of time kin placements last (i.e recidivism)
    b. Emotional connection relationship rates and whether relationships last
    c. Foster youth satisfaction survey to examine the process of specific intervention
        i. *It is important to note that there is currently an outcome study being conducted by the Family Builders agency in Alameda and San Francisco counties.

Introduction

The child welfare system is designed to protect children and youth, and to provide them with safe and caring homes if they have to be removed from their birth homes or families of origin due to abuse and/or neglect. The system, intended to be temporary, is meant to provide children with shelter and support while their parents receive needed services so the family can be reunified (Ruby Slippers Project, 2008). However, if children in foster care cannot return to their birth homes, then the goal of the child welfare system is to find those young people permanent, stable homes. Unfortunately, hundreds of thousands of children and youth find themselves growing up in foster care without permanent homes, permanent families or any lifelong connections (Jacobson, 2007).

In September 2006 there were approximately 510,000 children placed in foster care in the United States (U.S. DHHS, 2008). Of those, there were about 158,700 children and youth who could not reunify with their parents, but had case plans which included goals of living with a relative, securing a legal guardian, or getting adopted. So, currently nearly one-third of all children and youth in foster care will never return home to their families, while the rest will return home within two years (Mallon, Aledort and Ferrera, 2002). The children and youth that do not return home are often placed in "long-term placement" units in county child welfare agencies (Mallon et al., 2002, p. 409). Long-term placement units are specialized units where the the social workers are primarily placement workers who are focused on locating the best, suitable placements for children who will most likely not be adopted or be placed in guardianship (T. Lenz, Personal communication, June 1, 2009).

The one experience that often defines foster youth culture, more so than any other, is the experience of being displaced from one's family of origin (Sanchez, 2004). Children who are raised in foster care, and "age out" of foster care at age 18, may have lost connection with those important to them and may not have a consistent group of friends and family due to being uprooted (Jacobson, 2007, p. 5). They often lack permanent connections to others in their lives. This population of children, often with deeply routed behavior problems resulting from child abuse or neglect and intensified by separation, loss and unresolved grief, poses the greatest challenge today to timely permanency planning for children in out-of-home care (Mallon et al., 2002, p. 409).

Child welfare legislation was designed to protect and support young people in out-of-home placements and it has changed significantly over the last three decades. Since the early 1980s the culture of child welfare legislation has shifted between family preservation and protecting the safety of the child. A seminal piece of legislation, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 (P.L. 105-89), refocused efforts to promote safety and permanency for children in the child welfare system (Westat, 2001). The primary goal of the law was to promote the safety of children at every point in the child welfare process, while the second goal was to create and maintain permanency for children. The federal government specifically states that, "a child has achieved permanency when the child is reunified with his or her family, when a finalized adoption has occurred, or when a legal guardian has been established for the child" (U.S. DHHS, 2005). Yet, the reality is that there are approximately 26,000 youth who never reunify with parents, achieve guardianship, or get adopted while in foster care and age out or emancipate from the system each year (U.S. DHHS, 2008).

Nevertheless, we know that one of the important assets for a child or youth is to have an enduring, positive relationship with an adult who cares about that child (Bronfenbrenner, 1994 as cited in Vandivere, Chalk and Moore, 2003). The literature establishes that, absent a strong attachment to at least one caring adult, a young person is at risk for lifelong difficulty interacting with others and is more likely to confront challenges in becoming and remaining independent, handling emotions, functioning intellectually, and coping with stress (Crockenberg & Leerkes, 1999; Lee & Robbins, 1998; Lutz, 2003; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998 as cited in Freundlich, Avery, Munson, and Gerstenzang, 2006, p. 743). Consequently, there has been a second push of permanency in the child welfare system related to connecting young people to family and other adults in their lives to promote "permanent connections" as these youth leave foster care.

Purpose and Goals of this study

In the last two decades there has been increased attention on youth aging out of the foster care system. These young people often leave the foster care system at the age of majority, or otherwise become legally emancipated (Needell et al., 2002). Specifically, research has focused on how this population of young people has fared after emancipating from the foster care system (see Courtney et al., 2005). Unfortunately, most outcomes have been bleak, such as high unemployment rates, low educational achievement, high rates of homelessness and marginal housing, incarceration, high rates of public assistance, and early pregnancy (see Blome, 1997; Goerge, Bilaver, Lee, Needell, Brookhart, & Jackman, 2002; Courtney et al., 2007; Needell et al., 2002).

However, the field of child welfare continues to struggle with supporting and nurturing foster care youth's socio-emotional well-being (Samuels, 2008). In fact, the current foster care system fails to provide a permanent family or placement for every child and children often have difficulty staying connected to family and friends while in foster care (Kidsarewaiting.org, 2007). As a result, many child welfare agencies have started to focus on helping youth develop permanent emotional or relational connections with other adults prior to leaving the foster care system at age 18. There are various micro and macro permanency interventions used to help foster care youth find these connections with adults in their lives. These interventions have come from both the public child welfare and private non-profit sectors.

This youth-led study examines the effect of "permanency placement" and "permanent emotional connection" interventions on young people in foster care in the San Francisco Bay Area. The goal of the study is to examine the experiences of youth while they were in foster care, as told by the youth themselves. Data was collected through non-experimental qualitative interviews and focus groups with young adults that have aged out of the foster care system. Findings from this study will provide county social service directors, child welfare administrators, philanthropic organizations, non-profit service providers, and policy makers with important information about the intervention of developing permanent emotional connections for older youth in foster care.

General Outcomes of Permanency

There have been a number of studies examining the permanency outcomes of youth in foster care. Potter and Klein-Rothschild (2002) conducted an experimental study exploring what the factors are that may affect whether youth achieve permanent outcomes while in foster care. They compared 69 youth who did not achieve permanency with 69 (random) who did. The researchers found some of the variables affecting whether youth did not find permanency were:

- being African-American
- being older at the time of first placement
- having behavioral or emotional issues
- having more caseworkers
- having more placements
- not having substance use an issue
- having a mother with a developmental disability,
- having a mother with problem parental characteristics
- having parents who did not sign the family service plan
- having less visitation

How Foster Youth View Permanency and Social Support

Relatively little is known about social support among young adults who have left foster care (Courtney et al., 2007, p. 18), mainly because of the paucity of information currently available on children and youth's perceptions of permanency (Fox, Berrick and Frasch, 2008). Sanchez (2004) states that foster youth cannot achieve permanency if they do not have people in their lives with whom to have a permanent connection (p. 8). When a foster youth's daily experiences with people are mostly child welfare professionals, attorneys, care providers or other people associated with the foster care system, the chance is greater that when they emancipate they will have to leave these relationships behind (p. 8). This can make it even more difficult for foster care youth to find and maintain permanent adult connections.

Often, foster care youth are not involved in the placement process. For instance, Johnson, Volken, and Yoss (1995) explored the experiences of youth in their placement process. The researchers did semi-structured interviews with 59 children and youth ages 11 to 14 years old who were still in care. Very few children reported being active participants in the decision to move placements while in care (p. 965). In fact, 58% reported having little or no involvement in the placement process (Johnson et al., 1995). Yet, 27% stated that they were at least somewhat in involved in the decision of moving placements.

Some other researchers have examined foster youth's thoughts about permanency and expectations around their living situations. For example, Fox et al. (2008) interviewed 100 young people in foster care as children (average age 9.89 years) and found that 42% expected to live with their current caregiver as a teenager. Uncertainty about future living situations

characterized many children's expectations (p. 75). When asked if "you could live with anyone or anywhere, who would it be with?" thirty-seven percent identified their current caregiver, 22% said an extended relative's home, 20% said a birthparent's home, 11% were classified as "other," and 10% said they didn't know (p. 76).

When asked, "who decides if this will be your permanent home?" almost half identified their current caregiver and 26% said themselves. Very few children thought that social workers, relatives, or birthparents held this decision making power (p. 76). Even though the children in the sample had a consistent caregiver, many experienced confusion about their long-term security and managed feelings of uncertainty beyond the appropriate tasks of their developmental stage (p. 82). This lack of psychological permanency is likely to have an unmeasured influence on the children's overall well-being (p. 82). Fox et al. (2008) believe that direct conversations about permanency, facilitated by social workers, might also help to acknowledge and celebrate aspects of long-term relationships (p. 82).

Samuels (2008) conducted a comprehensive qualitative study examining the experiences of 29 former foster youth related to permanent emotional connections. Through the use of in-depth interviews and personal network maps, the researcher attempted to gain a better understanding of the social support networks among former foster youth (Samuels, 2008, p. 3). The participants ranged in age from 17 to 26 years old. All participants had aged out of a supportive program called Opportunity Passport, a part of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, designed to help young people make the transition to adulthood with support around education, housing, jobs and internships. All participants reported an existing support network that consisted of adult biological/adoptive/foster parents and kin, as well as friends (Samuels,

2008). Ambiguous loss was present throughout the stories of participants as they explained how they learned to cope with people coming in and out of their lives. Most conveyed a sense of hoping for permanence in relationships, but not being confident of the certainty of this or perceiving it as something under their control (p. 5).

Respondents stated that they valued support from individuals who could appreciate the complexity of their histories and experiences (Samuels, 2008, p. 36). And, when respondents were asked about who could really understand their experience in foster care, they overwhelmingly said that only other foster youth could. In addition, most respondents stated that they were not involved in any permanency planning process for their case (Samuels, 2008). In fact, most felt largely barred by social workers from discussions and plans related to their own futures (Samuels, 2008, p. 44).

However, participants in the Samuels (2008) study did mention their need for emotional support as they left the foster care system. For example, one young woman stated, "I feel emotional support. Because if they have that emotional support, it vamps your whole life. You know? If you didn't have that emotional support, in return the outcomes are gonna be bad problems" (p. 54). Interestingly, only thirteen (13) of the twenty-nine youth in the study knew the definition of "permanency planning." Most stated that they were not involved in the development of their permanency plans or were not involved until the last few years they were in foster care (Samuels, 2008, p. 44). In addition, some youth reported in the study that they had thought some of their relationships with foster parents were meant to last, but those relationships did not continue due to placement disruptions (Samuels, 2008). One youth stated, "I was in there (a foster

home) for a good period of time and we had developed —I thought we had a real good relationship. He dropped me off at a shelter because he said he had a business meeting. He said he was going to come back and pick me up in like a couple of days, and I ain't seen him since then. That has been like a long time. That is over 12 years ago" (p. 49).

Similarly, Sanchez (2004) conducted a qualitative study with 25 former foster youth. The average age was 19.4 years with an age range between 16 and 24 years old. Data was collected via phone interviews and a focus group that included some of the interview participants. It is unclear how the respondents were recruited. The goal of the study was to explore the barriers, fears and hopes that foster care youth may have about finding permanency (p. 5).

The researcher defined permanency as: 1) relational or emotional, 2) physical, and 3) legal, but these variables were not meant to be mutually exclusive (Sanchez, 2004). The majority of the youth who participated in the study agreed that relational is the most important type of permanence (Sanchez, 2004, p. 10). Some youth reported that they had permanent emotional connections with adults on a conditional basis, yet most reported at least one permanent connection with a responsible adult (p. 13). Examples of adults were: foster parents, next door neighbors, extended family of foster parents, former foster parents, peer mentors, Independent Living Program Coordinators, high school counselors, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), sisters and brothers, grandparents, group home staff, best friends, professors and social workers. The respondents identified three major barriers to permanency in placement: 1) inappropriate placements, 2) poorly selected and trained foster parents, and 3) social workers' push toward adoption for foster children.

Foster youth respondents in the Sanchez (2004) study reported many different experiences with permanence. For example, one youth stated, "I don't know what I would do if I had to move around every two months or every six months like I hear people doing. I think what made me the person I am today is that I have so much stability in my life. That's what really helped me get over the fact that I wasn't with my real mother, being with someone who was there for me and always treated me like her real child (p. 10)." Another said, "It's really important to make sure before emancipating a youth that they have one person. If I have somebody that I know I can depend on, that loves me and cares that I wake up tomorrow and am still breathing, I can get through it. I can walk through it (p. 11)."

Some young people even specifically focused on the importance of emotional versus legal permanency. For instance, one respondent said, "For older youth, emotional permanency is so much more important (than physical or legal) (p. 11)." And, another focused on emotional stability and loyalty by stating, "It's important to know that there is someone I can count on who wouldn't turn their back on me (p. 11)."

Sanchez (2004) reported that the respondents named two ways to empower foster youth with achieving permanency: 1) provide them access to information, and 2) listen to them. In terms of providing access to information, foster youth respondents stated that talking to youth about permanency options early on was important. And, youth reported that listening to youth and their specific wants and needs was important. Foster youth believe that social workers should have conversations with youth about permanency early and often (p. 20). For example, one youth stated, "The age should not matter. Once they are old enough, five, six, or seven, and

able to communicate and comprehend, we should talk to them about what they want – you should be able to get what you want. Everyone should go to his/her court hearings and one of the questions that should be on the emancipation checklist is, 'Do you have somebody?' You shouldn't be able to leave the court unless you do (p. 19)."

Courtney et al. (2007) had approximately 589 respondents in wave three of their Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth when social support was explored. The respondents were asked about the type and quality of social support in their lives. The researchers used the Medical Outcome Study (MOS) Social Support Survey (Sherbourne and Steward, 1991). This 19-item measure contains subscales for four types of social support: emotional/informational, tangible, positive social interaction, and affectionate (Courtney et al., 2007, p. 17). For each item, respondents were asked to rate how often a specific type of support is available to them using a 5-point scale that ranges from 1 = none of the time to 5 = all of the time (p. 17). Affectionate support, positive social interaction support, tangible support, and emotional/informational support were the four categories examined.

The mean score across all items was 3.8, indicating that the young adults in the Midwest Study perceived themselves as having social support some or most of the time (p. 19). However, whether the social support youth reported having was long-term permanent support is unknown. Adequacy of level of support was also examined. A significant portion of the youth reported that they had too few people supporting them by: 1) listening (26%), 2) helping with favors (31%), 3) loaning money (33%), or 4) encouraging goals (29%) (Courtney et al., 2007).

Clearly, foster youth have many different perspectives, opinions and experiences with emotional permanency and social support. In the last few years there has been an increase of

public and private non-profit interventions directed at increasing the permanent emotional connections among youth in foster care. The next sections illustrate study outcomes from these permanency interventions.

Outcomes of Permanency Interventions

Intensive Relative Search Project

Foster care youth often lack meaningful and enduring connections with family members who can support them and provide them with a sense of connectedness and belonging. The IRSP staff believe that identification of relatives for these youth can provide them with an opportunity for legal permanency, as well as emotional permanency. For many of these youth simply connecting them to family members who can provide ongoing emotional support (if not a legal permanent placement) can increase their sense of self-efficacy and well-being, and perhaps even facilitate their ability to safely and successfully navigate their lives. Most caseworkers, though, lack the information, training, and support necessary for connecting foster care youth with family. As a result, many youth age out of the foster care system each year without a home or sense of connection to family.

In 2005 Champagne, Curtis, Riley, and Hartnett examined the outcomes of the Intensive Relative Search Project that took place in Cook County, Illinois. There were 24 youth who participated in the intervention and all had a permanency goal of independence. Seven youth were interviewed at follow-up for the study (6 males and 1 female) one year after the study began. Youth were selected for the project due to one (or more) of the following conditions: 1) Youth expressed a desire for contact with family, 2) Youth was in an unstable placement, and/or

3) Youth wanted a permanent placement (adoption or guardianship).

Six out of the seven respondents connected, or re-connected, with a family member after their involvement with the Intesive Relative Search Project (Champagne et al., 2005, p. 8). Four of the six who made a connection or re-connected, did so with minimal or no caseworker intervention; these connections were facilitated by the youth or by the other family members. One youth made a connection with a moderate level of caseworker intervention.

Six of the youth described 'family belongingness' as the central component of their relationship with their newly connected or re-connected relative (Champagne et al., 2005, p. 9). Of the six youth that connected or re-connected with a relative, four could be described as 'major connections' as the youth talk regularly with the relative or visit them on a routine basis. Contact between the youth and the relative has increased or remained steady since the connection happened. One youth connected with a relative more than once, but the contact was sporadic and was not increasingly consistent over time (Champagne et al., 2005). Another youth connected with a relative, but the contact was minimal immediately following the connection. The contact had lessened even further over the first year.

Of the six youth that found connections, three reported having developed an emotional bond and relationship with the relative with whom they connected (Champagne et al., 2005). In fact, three of the youth found more family members as a result of their first connection with a relative. For example one youth stated, "My auntie takes me out to see my daddy" (Champagne et al., 2005, p. 10). Another youth reports that, "I didn't have a Christmas with my family. I didn't have a Thanksgiving with my family. I didn't have a New Year's with my family…and now I have that, you know, I have that" (p. 10).

Four out of the seven youth report that there was minimal or no caseworker intervention that occurred in order to facilitate a connection or re-connection with relatives and two youth report that there was moderate caseworker intervention such as conducting a diligent search or making phone calls to family members (Champagne et al., 2005). According to the youth, there were no reports of significant caseworker intervention. However, the researchers acknowlege that it is possible that youth were not privy to everything that caseworkers did to help make connections with relatives.

It appears that a major barrier to re-connecting youth to family members is the youth's willingness to invest emotionally in the process given that there is a possibility that connections will not be made with certain people or that connections may take persistence and continued effort (i.e. emotional risk) on the part of the youth. Two youth did not express a lot of interest in being re-connected or maintaining the connection once it happened. Overall, this study illustrates that caseworkers should involve youth in the process by teaching them how to search for relatives, and especially how to approach them. As one youth said, "seek help, but learn to help yourself."

Family Finding

Family Finding is another intensive relative search model with the ultimate goals of achieving permanency and supporting enduring family connections for children in the foster care system. The model, conceived by Kevin Campbell in 1999, follows family-tracing techniques used by agencies such as the Red Cross to reunite families separated by international conflicts and natural catastrophes. Through the Family Finding model, foster care workers are trained to

use various search tools including genealogical archives and commercial Internet-based services to find family members of children placed in out-of-home care settings. Since Mr. Campbell began training child welfare workers in 2000, this model has spread throughout the country and helps find permanent homes and family connections for many youth in the foster care system for whom traditional attempts at finding permanent placements have failed.

Family Finding (FF) begins with a review of child welfare case files and then comprehensive internet searches to find family members who may be willing to house, or become social support for foster youth. The model has six stages including: 1) "discovery" of at least 40 family members for the child or youth, 2) "engagement" of those individuals who know the child best, including family members and others important to the child, to provide information about the child, 3) "planning" for the successful future of the child with the participation of family members and others important to the child, 4) "decision-making" for the future of the child (including a legal and emotional permanency plan) while taking into account the safety and well-being of the child, 5) "evaluation" of the permanency plan for the child, and 6) "follow-up supports" to ensure that the child and their family can access and receive informal and formal supports essential to maintaining permanency for the child.

In 2006 San Francisco County's Human Services Agency (HSA) piloted the Family Finding permanency intervention method with 20 foster youth. Currently the county offers Family Finding services through a collaboration and partnership with Seneca Center. Child welfare workers in HSA work with Family Finding Specialists from Seneca Center to help foster care youth find family members to live and/or connect with. In the Fall of 2008 the Child Trends Social Science Research group launched a national study examining the Family Finding model in

California (San Francisco and Los Angeles counties), North Carolina and Oregon (Pearl, 2008). The study has an experimental design to help determine the impact of the model for children entering the foster care system in these three states. The Child Trends study is not a youth-led project, but a program evaluation using administrative data and child welfare/social work staff.

California Permanency for Youth Project Evaluations

The California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP) was started in January 2003 and operates under the Public Health Institute. The project's goal is to address the failure of the child welfare system to establish permanent placements (Friend, 2009, p. 35) and to help achieve permanent adult connections for youth in foster care. In fact, CPYP it is dedicated to ensuring that no child leave the California child welfare system without a permanent lifelong connection to a caring adult (Jacobson, 2007). The project's objective is to build awareness among child welfare workers and administrators, legislators, and judicial representatives about the strong need children and older youth in foster care have for permanent connections.

Additionally, the CPYP project works towards improvements in policy and administrative practices regarding permanency and has done work in the following Bay Area counties: Alameda, Contra Costa, Monterey, San Francisco, San Mateo, Solano and Sonoma. The tasks of the project are to:

- Develop a Permanency for Youth Task Force
- Provide technical assistance to county child welfare agencies
- Provide a training curriculum on permanency to all county child welfare agencies
- Hold a national convening on permanency
- Develop documents to increase awareness around the issue of permanency
- Conduct a formative evaluation of each county's implementation process

CPYP will finish its project work at the end of January 2010 with the ten California counties it started work with in 2008 (M. Louisell, personal communication, August 31, 2009). In addition, CPYP still facilitates multi-county meetings in Northern, Southern and Central California with the counties and non-profits who have been involved with the project since 2002 (M. Louisell, personal communication, August 31, 2009).

In 2006 CPYP conducted a formal evaluation of its four pilot counties in California, however, this evaluation used child welfare administrator and direct service staff for its sample and did not include a youth evaluation. The evaluation was a final evaluation of the four pilot counties (Alameda, Monterey, San Mateo and Stanislaus). Demographic information on youth served, along with outcome information about whether the pilot youth achieved permanent connections by the end of the study, was provided. The sample consisted of 46 youth from the four counties. Youth were between the ages of 11 and 21 years.

Eleven youth (24%) found no lifelong connection by the end of the study, 20 youth (44%) found a lifelong connection (but legal permanency was not being pursued), 8 youth (17%) found a lifelong connection and were pursuing legal permanency, and 7 (15%) had legal permanency finalized for them (CPYP, 2006). Social workers for the youth who did not find a lifelong connection were asked about why the youth did not find a connection. The reasons were: the youth was unwilling to pursue a connection, there were not enough resources to support a connection, there were other barriers, the social worker was not able to spend sufficient time on permanency efforts, and the youth was willing/ the social worker did the work, but a connection still did not occur (CPYP, 2006).

A second evaluation of CPYP was conducted in 2008 on the outcomes of twelve youth from ten project counties for a total of 120 youth. There were four reporting periods on the project, as well as a beginning and ending evaluation. Response rates from caseworkers averaged about 90 percent. The average age of youth entering care was 8 years old and the mean number of placements was approximately 8. The study was from 2006 to the end of 2007. Twenty-nine youth (24%) found no lifelong connection by the end of the study, 62 youth (51%) found a lifelong connection (but legal permanency was not being pursued), 14 youth (12%) found a lifelong connection and were pursuing legal permanency, and 15 (13%) had legal permanency finalized for them. The legal permanency results were two adoptions, 10 reunifications and three guardianships (CPYP, 2008). Sixty-four percent of the caseworkers reported that the successful permanent connections were probably due to the work of CPYP (CPYP, 2008). The next section describes CPYP's Emancipated Youth Connections Project.

CPYP Emancipated Youth Connections Project

In January 2006 the California Permanency for Youth Project began a new pilot project attempting to connect former foster youth with other in their lives. The sample size for the project was twenty, the mean age was 23.68 years (with an age range of 17 to 39 years) and 70% of the participants were female. The mean number of years in care was 11.5 and the mean number of placements was 12.

The goal of the project was to recruit adults who were formerly in foster care to help them develop permanent connections with adults in their lives. An important aspect to the project was providing the participants with a supportive professional environment to explore issues such as

fears, coping with loss and personal defensive styles, ramifications of decisions, and other "emotional issues" regarding permanency during the project (Jacobson, 2007). Project staff conducted searches to locate potential connections such as relatives, past foster parents, teachers, coaches, fictive kin, past neighbors, etc. Then, potential connections were engaged, assessed, prepared, and supported by project staff.

The participant's attitude toward permanency was recorded at the time of intake and at closure. The scale of measurement was:

- wants permanent connection
- is ambivalent
- does not want a permanent connection
- do not yet know the participant's attitude about forming a permanent connection.

One participant did not want a permanent connection (she changed her mind later), two stated they were ambivalent, and sixteen reported wanting a permanent connection (Jacobson, 2007). Information from one participant was not collected. By the end of the study fourteen participants had made a permanent emotional connection, four had made a potential connection, and one had not made a connection (Jacobson, 2007). The most common goal for participants was to locate one or more family members (Jacobson, 2007, p. 25).

At the close of the study there were 139 new permanent connections made with biological family members and 41 connections with non-biological family members. An average of 58 hours per case was spent trying to develop and maintain the permanent connections for participants. These hours included travel time, visiting participants, searching and speaking with connections.

This project, and resulting study, is seminal in the research area of permanent connections for foster youth as it examines some of the more clinical and emotional issues related to helping youth find familial and other connections. The researchers specifically examined how the process of the search affected the participants. For example, some of the participants experienced suicidal ideation during the search for permanent connections (Jacobson, 2007). And, others experienced a crisis during the project, such as one participant who made a strong connection with a past social worker, after not making connections with her first two choices (Jacobson, 2007). Then, after making a connection, the social worker suddenly died. The project did offer support to this participant, and others, with counseling through contracted social workers, which seemed to contribute to participants' psychological stability, overall mental health, and emotional growth. Unfortunately, a major limitation was that the study did not empirically examine the clinical issues and results. That is, qualitative data exploring the process of the project was not systematically gathered or analyzed.

There are fiscal and systemic issues related to helping youth find permanent connections. It takes extra resources to have internal social workers, or contracted out private non-profit agencies, search for family, prepare youth for placements, and conduct follow-up.
Given the potential clinical issues related to family finding, it takes additional time, effort, funding to help young people not only find family connections, but maintain them.

Foster Care Youth in California

In California, children enter the foster care system under the auspices of either county child welfare services or probation departments (Needell et al., 2002). The state has the largest foster

care population in the United States; 66,496 youth as of January 1, 2008, and 12,700 of those young people are ages 16 to 20. See Table 1 for the breakdown of children and youth in foster care placements in 2008 in California. Between 2007 and 2008 4,586 foster youth emancipated from the California foster care system, while another 1,545 had "Other" outcomes that may have included youth who ran from foster care as adolescents (Needell et al., 2009).

Table 1. Foster Care Youth in California by Age (2008)

	Number
Ages 16 to 20 years	12,700
Ages 11 to 15 years	18,626
Ages birth to 10	35,170
TOTAL YOUTH IN CARE	66,496

Needell, Webster, Armijo, Lee, Dawson, Magruder, Exel, Glasser, Williams, Zimmerman, Simon et al. (2009)

The majority of these young people leave care at age 18 (72% for child welfare and 69% for probation), but many emancipate before age 18 (15% for child welfare and 28% for probation). Of the 4,586 youth that left care in California, it is estimated that 835 are from the San Francisco Bay Area (Needell et al., 2009). Unfortunately, there is very little information about these young people. See Table 2 below for a breakdown of youth emancipating from the Bay Area.

Table 2. Emancipating Youth in the Bay Area (2007-2008)

	Number
Alameda*	241
Contra Costa*	138
Marin	15
Monterey	20
Napa	7
San Francisco	139
San Mateo	39
Santa Clara*	138
Santa Cruz	22
Solano	37
Sonoma	39
TOTAL YOUTH	835

Needell, Webster, Armijo, Lee, Dawson, Magruder, Exel, Glasser, Williams, Zimmerman, Simon et al. (2009)

* Counties were study was conducted

Of all the youth in foster care in

California, about one-third of these young people have had five or more placements and 41% have been in care for 5 or more years (Needell et al., 2002). Between 2000 and 2001 approximately 65% of the youth aging out were homeless at the time of emancipation (Needell et al., 2002) and 30% were linked to welfare, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, after leaving care. Also, former foster youth from California have high rates of publicly funded mental health services (53%), Medi-Cal insurance (59%), and pregnancy (20% are mothers within one year of leaving the system) (Needell et al., 2002).

The case plan goals for all children in foster care in California are: 1) reunification (reunifying the child with parents from whose care the child was removed), 2) adoption, and 3) guardianship (relative guardianship is preferred to non-relative). However, many counties in the state participate in 'Concurrent planning' which is related to making sure that all three placement or outcome options above are being worked on by the child welfare worker at the same time. Essentially, the primary plan usually involves a goal of reunification and working with and providing services to the family to achieve this goal. At the same time, social workers should plan and work towards an alternative permanency goal for the child (e.g., permanent relative placement, guardianship, or adoption) in case the primary plan is not achieved within the timeline set (Westat, 2001).

Given the focus on permanent placements, a new fourth definition of "permanency" has developed in the foster care system in recent years: For young people, who will not be reunified, adopted or placed in guardianship, to develop family and other permanent connections and/or relationships with adults prior to leaving the foster care system at age 18.

Methodology

Twenty-seven young people were participants for this study who had exited foster care from three Northern California counties. The counties, Alameda, Contra Costa and Santa Clara, were chosen using two main criteria. First, each county had to be from the San Francisco Bay Area. Second, each county had to have been a California Permanency for Youth Project county (where child welfare workers were trained in the CPYP model) or had trained staff in the family finding model. There were other Bay Area counties that fit the two main criteria, but they either contracted out their permanency intervention services to a private non-profit that was not interested in assisting with participant recruitment, or there were no child welfare staff from the county willing or able to assist with recruitment.

We initially wanted to recruit young people still in foster care in the three counties, but this would have involved additional county review board approvals, as well as tracking, locating, and gaining consent from the biological parents and legal guardians of all potential participants in the study (Samuels, 2008, p. 15). This study was approved by the Committee for the Protection of Human and Animal Subjects from San Francisco State University. The Primary Investigator on this project developed a Youth Advisory Board (YAB), made up of four former foster care youth. They were recruited from the San Francisco State University's Guardian Scholars Program, a program on campus to assist undergraduates with a history of foster care. While in foster care the YAB members were placed in Alameda, San Francisco and San Diego counties. They helped develop the research questions for this study, oversaw the data collection of the study, and assisted with reading and editing the report. However, they were not participants in this study. There were two methods of data collection for this study: in-depth interviews and focus groups.

The study explored the following research questions:

1. How were youth affected by the "permanency" or "family finding" process? Specifically, the project examined:
   - What specific services or support did the youth receive?
   - What program did the youth participate in?
   - Was the process or the service(s) helpful for youth or not helpful?
   - Was the process or the service(s) respectful of the youth's needs?
   - How should the process or the service(s) be changed or improved?
   - How should the process or the service(s) be kept the same?
   - Did the youth obtain a permanent connection from this process?

Participant Recruitment

The primary investigator on this project discussed recruitment with two county personnel and one Program Manager from a private non-profit to assist with recruitment. These individuals assisted with recruitment by getting approval from the potential participants to be contacted and explained the study to the young people if they had questions. Names and phone numbers were provided from two counties to assist with recruitment for the interviews and focus groups. The Program Manager from the private non-profit did all of the recruitment with potential participants and greatly assisted with the focus groups. It is important to note the two county personnel were not the same child welfare workers that case managed the youth or oversaw their case while they were in foster care. There is no potential bias in recruitment as the social workers were not the same workers who assisted youth with developing permanent connections while in foster care.

The goal of the project was to have approximately 20 to 25 participants. Former foster youth is often a difficult population to recruit given the face that they may lose contact with social service providers or their previous child welfare workers, and sometimes return to their families of origin or other kin. The process of recruitment was continued until there were twenty-seven participants. The individuals who assisted with recruitment were also helpful in suggesting

appropriate locations for interviews and focus groups in cases where participants requested not to be interviewed in their homes (Samuels, 2008). Once a group of participants had been recruited from a county, arrangements for the interview were made with participants within a period of 1 to 2 days. Interviews were arranged over weekends or in the evenings to accommodate the work and school schedules of participants. The focus groups were set up for the evening time mid-week and whichever recruited youth could attend did so. The interviews and focus groups were audio-taped and hand written notes were taken.

Research Assistants

The data was collected by two research assistants hired to work on this project. The first assistant has an MSW and is also a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in the State of California. She has over fifteen years of experience in social work and has worked in a direct service and management capacity with former foster care youth for the last six years. She has also facilitated a number of focus groups for past research studies with former foster youth. The second research assistant holds Bachelors of Social Work and is a former foster care youth from Southern California. This is her first experience as a research assistant.

Recruitment Counties

As stated above, the participants for this study were recruited from Alameda, Contra Costa and Santa Clara counties. Table 3 below illustrates the total numbers of foster care youth in placement in those counties, and the total number of 16 to 20 years old in placement.

Santa Clara County's Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS) developed its own

Table 3. Youth in Foster Care from Recruitment Counties (January 1, 2009)

	Total Number	16-20 year olds
Alameda	**2202**	**584**
Contra Costa	**1335**	**287**
Santa Clara	**1588**	**339**

Family Finding (FF) Unit in 2003. Initially, the department's FF program began through a collaboration and partnership with Eastfield Ming Quong (EMQ), a private non-profit in Santa Clara County. The first set of children and youth in the FF unit were Santa Clara County child welfare clients who were also receiving services at EMQ. The county conducted an outcome study on these children and youth in 2005. The study had a sample size of 91 and the time period examined was between November 2003 and December 2004. At the end of the study twenty-nine children (32%) were reunified or living with family members, 56 children (61%) were living in the community with durable connections to family, and 6 children (7%) did not make physical or permanent connections to family (Marsh, 2005).

Reasons for not succeeding in FF were:

- children were AWOL at the time of the FF referral
- children had needs too great for family members to work with
- viable family members were not located, and
- children were placed for guardianship or adoption with non-kin

(Marsh, 2005)

Santa Clara County's FF unit offers services as an "umbrella" unit whereby the county caseworker owns the case, but the FF social worker manages the family finding process (J. Weinberg, personal communication, June 26, 2009). The FF unit has prioritized the 16 to 19 year

old youth population for FF services in hopes that it can help these young people find permanent emotional connections before they leave the foster care system. Cultural competency is also an integral part of the unit, given the high rates of children of color involved in the child welfare system (U.S. DHHS, 2006). For example, there is a bilingual, Spanish-speaking FF social worker that works closely with the Mexican Consulate to conduct family finding in Mexico for children with relatives who may live there. Additionally, there is an African-American FF social worker that works with African-American children, which may help with the FF process. It is believed that by having a social worker from the same race, the potential family may respond to the FF process differently than if they were approached by a social worker from another race (J. Weinberg, personal communication, June 26, 2009).

The three main components to the county's FF process are: 1) running the family search report with Accurint software (from Lexis-Nexis), 2) identifying and confirming relationships with the youth and contacting viable family connections, and 3) facilitating the development of relationship and creating a transition plan. The FF social worker works collaboratively with the child welfare caseworker throughout the process. In April 2009 the FF unit processed 146 cases that involved 283 children. The FF social workers found 219 maternal relatives, 83 paternal relatives, and 2163 non-relative extended family members in that month alone (J. Weinberg, personal communication, June 26, 2009).

Contra Costa County has been a California Permanency for Youth Project county since 2005. Contra Costa's definition of "Permanency" is to have an enduring family relationship (CPYP 2009). This family relationship is defined as at least one adult who provides: 1) A safe and stable parenting relationship meant to last a lifetime, 2) Love and unconditional commitment, 3)

The legal rights whenever possible and social status of full family membership, 4) Physical, emotional, social, cognitive, spiritual and cultural well-being, 5) Assurance of lifelong connections to extended family, siblings, other significant adults, family history, and traditions, race and ethnic heritage, culture, religion and language, 6) Opportunities, whenever possible, for the Youth to have a leadership role in developing his/her lifelong relationships (CPYP, 2009).

At this time Contra Costa County has no specific family finding unit or contract with outside agencies to provide family finding services. However, the county is unique in that each social worker conducts a Team Decision Making (TDM) meeting when a youth comes into foster care (the dependency social worker), or whenever there is a placement disruption (the social worker carrying the case). The TDM brings together all individuals connected to the youth such as social workers, therapists, family members, mentors, teachers, attorneys, etc. to work out a permanency plan for each youth. These meetings are standard for each youth.

Alameda County has been taking small samples of youth ages 11 and older and giving them family finding services through private non-profits contracted with the county. They serve about 30-40 youth per year with family finding services through Family Builders by Adoption. This agency is currently conducting an evaluation of outcomes of its family finding services. The grant funding this project ends in 2009. Alameda County has also published, "A Guide to Permanency Options for Youth" which defines permanency in legal, physical, and relational terms. The next page describes the sample used for this study.

Sample

Participants were young adults who were placed in foster care in Alameda, Contra Costa or Santa Clara County as an adolescent. There were twenty-seven (27) participants in this study, and all came from diverse backgrounds (see Table 4 below for participant demographics). None of the study participants were adopted while in foster care, and all had aged out of foster care at age 18 or 19. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 25 years old and participation was voluntary. Respondents received $30 cash for their participation in this study.

Table 4. Participant Demographics (n=27)

Gender		
	Female	**15 (56%)**
	Male	**12 (44%)**
Ethnicity		
	African-American	**19 (70%)**
	Caucasian	**2 (8%)**
	Latino/a	**6 (22%)**
Living Situation		
	Independently (apartment or college dorms)	**23 (85%)**
	Family/Kin	**3 (11%)**
	Spouse	**1 (4%)**

Analysis

All interviews and focus groups were transcribed and coded into themes. The coding process included thematic coding and open coding. The analysis of the data followed a Grounded Theory Method approach, using what is called constant comparison (Schatzman, 1991). This method is used to verify and substantiate the more conceptual findings by checking each theme against the raw data—in this case, interviews and focus groups (Samuels, 2008, p. 19). This approach was chosen because the purpose of this research study is to learn about former foster youth perspectives on whether and how they were able to develop relational permanence while in care. The method is appropriate for this study because it provides an analytic process that produces conceptualizations about an experience (e.g., building relational permanence among young adults with histories of

foster care) grounded in the perspectives of those who are living that experience (Samuels, 2008, p. 19). Direct quotes from participants are provided to illustrate the different theme areas and sections. The next section describes the limitations to this study.

Limitations

It is important to note the limitations of this study. First, the sample used for this study was small. Secondly, a convenience sample was used. All interview and focus group participants voluntarily chose to be subjects in the study and made the effort to contact the researcher or research assistants after being informed of the general nature of the study. This group's responses may be inherently biased, as they are former foster youth who still have contact with one or more social service providers. A third limitation is this study's inability to analyze the demographic and personal characteristics of participants that may shape their relational patterns and experiences with child welfare workers (e.g., gender, culture, mental health) (Samuels, 2008). A fourth limitation was that the interview instrument used to gather data for this study was not checked for reliability.

A fifth limitation is related to the self-report nature of the data collected. Qualitative interviews and focus groups involve self-report which can include many possible sources of bias. Self-reports are subject to many forms of bias including telling the interviewers what they think interviewers want to hear and social desirability response set which includes telling the interviewers things that make the participants look good. Additionally, self-reports may be unreliable due to participants forgetting information, participants not telling the truth about actual services received by foster care youth, or information not being known by the participants. Lastly,

this study is about relationships and how former foster youth were treated during the permanency planning process. It can be limiting to only have data from one side of a relationship (Samuels, 2008). The following section illustrates the results and themes from the interviews and focus groups. The bolded subheadings are the main themes that arose from the data.

Results

The Importance of Developing Family & Permanent Connections

> *You have to understand what people is going through. Some people can't see their families, some people can't talk to them. You got other stuff in your life going on, even if you did just get taken from your parents' place. The reality is that stuff do go through your head. I know when I was young and when I first got took. I was crying every night. I was like I want my momma, I want my sister. And at first I was like damn, I am gonna have to adapt to it. (male participant)*

Participants of this study were able to articulate why developing family connections while in care is so important to them and other youth in foster care. This male participant was able to clearly state why foster care youth should find and maintain family and other emotional connections after leaving care:

> *[Social workers] should get you close to your family before you age out. They should try to give you a place to be, like, First Place (housing), or ILSP or any youth programs that have adults that are there for you – it doesn't necessarily have to be family. I think that is the best thing they can do. Try to keep the strong relationships with that child. You are aging out and 18 you are grown, but [the social worker] will call and check on you. That makes that person feel special or important. That could make their*

> *confidence high, like what are you getting ready to do now. So, I mean it is like you have to have that follow-up. It doesn't have to be for the rest of their life, but for a time period. I am not going to let this child, because she is still a child, go in to the streets.)*

Most young people do not live completely independently between the ages of 18 and 24. In fact, about 50% of young people in this age group report that they still live with their parents, while 27% of all 18 to 34 year olds report living with their parents (Rumbaut and Komaie, 2007). As increasing numbers of young middle- to upper-middle-class adults in their early 20s return home from college to receive a range of familial and instrumental supports from parents, young people exiting foster care may not enjoy such resources (Samuels, 2008, p. 8). This male participant concurs with this sentiment:

> *Nowadays they say that is 18, you emancipate at 18 and I don't think at 18 a human's mind is fully developed and really understands life. I think that at 18 is pretty much the most vulnerable time where they are going to need structure, they are going to need guidance. They are going to need mentorship and leadership.*

Connections to family are also important to foster care youth. Even if the time spent with family is limited while the youth is in care, spending time with family can greatly affect a youth's sense of self. For example, some youth talked about being able to develop a sense of identity because of their contact with family members while in foster care. Research shows that developing a sense of identity is an important task for adolescents (Erikson, 1994). Youth reported that maintaining family connections while in care is very important for them to find out who they are and who they are most like in their family:

> *For me, I lived my auntie since I was about 2 and ½. At 12 years old I moved to South Carolina to [be with] my aunt, by thirteen I came back to Oakland and lived with different people. To me, (being placed with family) means a lot because you find out who you are and what you are about. And, you want to know who you look like the most and other things.*

Other youth mentioned feeling isolated while in care because of a lack of family connections and interactions. They thought that having their social worker or county child welfare agency find family (either to be placed with or to see on a regular basis) was helpful to their mental health. One female respondent stated, *"Family Finding was helpful because it was very lonely in care. I wanted to get in touch with certain family members. And, they [the county] found them."* And, participants also reported that being placed with family was also helpful to them because family members were familiar and comforting:

> *I got into foster care when I was 14 and I immediately stayed with my auntie and then moved back in with my cousins, so I was never in no strange place. I was with family.*

Other young people recognize the emotional and psychological benefit of having direct contact with family, especially siblings, while in care. This contact could happen on the weekends, with passes, and needs to be approved and facilitated by the county social worker. One participant stated,

> *My social worker helped me get connected mainly to my siblings, not like just adults, like going around and looking for uncles. But, they always made sure I saw my brothers and sisters with weekend passes. It was for my benefit.*

In addition to facilitating informal social contact with family members, having more structured contact (such as counseling with birthparents) can also be beneficial to foster youth. One female participant, who had a probation placement, stated that she was encouraged by her social worker to do counseling with her family, which happened while the youth was still in out-of-home placement:

> *My social worker always used to try and get me and my mom together when I was in placement. She got us 10 free sessions of counseling with me, my mom and my brothers (and sometimes my grandmother). She would try to do that because she felt that my mom couldn't control me. I felt like my mom was giving me away. I got closer to my mom because of counseling. I went home to my mom's when I got my home passes. We went shopping and go and sit down and have a ladies talk. It was things that we had never done. Like, me and my mom had never talked about anything. I had never opened up to her. After those counseling classes, I open up to her. Like right now she is my best friend. I could have never imagined that. We still argue about stuff, but I am grateful to have her. The social worker worked to make that happen with my mom. The process was very helpful for me. I didn't believe she loved me. If you loved me, why did you give me away. The counselor made me see that I was a bit uncontrollable. When I had a curfew I didn't care, then I wondered why are you trying to whoop me? I had an anger problem.*

Similarly, as a result of long-term therapy this male participant showed a high level of insight when thinking about his relationship and connection to his parents. With the help of his social worker he was able to begin family therapy, before reunification, to improve his relationship with his mother and father, even though he admitted to having some anger management issues:

> *I saw a therapist from age 4 to 12. The reason being is because I would have temper tantrums and outbursts. They didn't understand why I was so advanced but had a set back with this attitude [behavioral acting out] and negativity. I just knew that I was always upset and it had a lot to do with the environment I was in. Even though I didn't understand it, I knew that something was missing. [I discovered what was missing] was an in depth relationship with my mom and dad. So my social worker set up the therapy services.*

Some young people even found the benefit of, and sought to continue, living with extended family members even after aging out of care. In the State of California there are more housing options available for former foster youth than ever before and some of the options include living with family members. One participant was referred to a THP-Plus Host Home Program, a housing program for former foster youth ages 18 and 24, which enables the youth to live with family or other adults after leaving care. The adults or family members that house the former foster youth are paid for doing so (up to 24 months) and the youth continues to receive case management and referral services. This female participant requested to live with her aunt for her host home program:

> *So my family had to get approved before I could go to live with them. I live with my aunt now in THP-Plus. I knew what was best for me and that was it. So I did it. Yeah I still talk to my case manager because they help you up until you're 25 so I still talk to him about stuff like, well now that I need more help because I'm going to have a baby, so they give me more help like resources and stuff like that.*

This male participant also had the opportunity to live in a transitional living program for youth that had aged out of foster care and chose to live with family instead. He, like many other respondents, emphasizes the importance of being close to, and living with, family:

> *Well I was in different group homes and then my social worker was like, "Well do you want to go with your family or to a transitional housing program?" And I chose my family over that.*

Some youth were able to articulate how finding and maintaining a permanent emotional or physical connection can meet their psychological needs. They were able to express that something as simple as having some listen to your experiences and challenges is important. For example, this male participant was referring to family when he stated,

> *Honestly, I just wanted someone to actually listen to what I was going through, like a lot of people say when you're going through something people really don't want to tug, you know I wanted you to tug, I needed a tug.*

Similarly, this female participant was able to articulate that emotional connections and relationships with older adults can be beneficial for many reasons, including helping young people be successful later in life:

> *We all need someone to look up to. We all need some kind of advice, we all need some kind of direction because we're still young and trying to find ourselves and who we are and having that mentor relationship with an adult could make a big difference. Some adults don't understand that and then they wonder why kids act out the way they do just to be seen. If they thought more and really wanted me to have a nice life or a better future that would have been nice if they just stop thinking about the moment, thinking long term goals and how certain things can impact kids lives.*

Like to me having my dad or a grandma around, that would have been better than just feeling all alone.

They gave me my dad's death certificate. That helped me find my dad's side of the family. I am still working on trying to find my brother though.

There were some participants who were able to develop relationships with care providers that, over time became more like a family relationship. For example, one female participant had a strong, loving relationship with her foster mother that continued even after the young person aged out of care:

I used to live with this woman and l love her still and still contact her. Like she's helping me with my taxes now. She was like, we never liked addressed her as my foster mother. She was like my aunt and everybody knew that. She was cool. I go and visit her and we talk. She's someone I can depend on. She always wants what is best for me. She's like you know you could do this, you could do that. She is like a family member.

When young people cannot return home to their birth parents, and have to remain in foster care most of their childhood years, it is the hope of child welfare professionals that these youth can be placed with family members and will not have to move placements while in care. If a young person has to remain in care until they age out, the goal is that they stay in the same placement and live there as long as possible (even after turning 18 years old). In this study there was unfortunately only <u>one</u> participant who experienced this situation:

I was placed with my grandmother since age 3 months, and now I am 19 and I still live with her.

Diana Walters, a former foster youth, defines permanency as

> *Familism: which does not rest on biological ties, but rather a reciprocal sense of commitment, sharing, cooperation and intimacy that is taken as the defining bonds between "family" members. It embraces a feeling of invitation, or welcomeness, unconditional love, personal loyalty, and a willingness to sacrifice for others. Familism makes the home a base to which you can always return when your independent endeavors fail or prove unsatisfactory (Charles and Nelson, 2000).*

Family Placement Options Were Not Discussed with the Youth

Even though all of the youth came from counties that trained social workers in permanency planning or family finding services, there were many youth that reported never talking about family placement options with their social workers. For example, when asked about whether his social worker discussed family placement options, one youth simply stated, *"Nobody talked about family finding services to me."*

Other youth stated that they believed that if they wanted to live with family, they were responsible for finding their own family members, without receiving any assistance from social work staff. For example, one male youth said, *"You have to know how to search for your own resources."* Similarly, another male interviewee was very disappointed and surprised that his social worker could not help him find his sister, who was also in foster care, but was in another local county:

> *My social worker didn't tell me nothing about finding family because I didn't even know where my sister was. I was living in San Francisco County and she was in Alameda County. So, we wasn't even in the same county, but I still found her because she was my sister. My sister's social worker knew about family finding, but mine didn't. Your brothers and sisters will have different social workers, which makes it hard. You may live in a house with*

your brothers and your sisters for a month or two, maybe three, maybe four, but after that they are going to separate ya'll one by one.

Other participants were able to connect with family through other sources such as friends or community resources. This male participant found his aunt through a community program and eventually was placed with her, because he requested it. He stated that his social worker did not offer assistance and did not mention family placement options before he pursued it:

When I first got into foster care my social worker didn't say, "oh you can go and stay with family." My auntie found me at a Boys and Girl club. She said, if you want, you can come and stay with me. But then when I got to stay with her my social worker was like – well my first social worker was cool when I said I wanted to stay with my auntie. He didn't check up on me or nothing. He made sure she got some money and that was it.

Other youth reported having other adults, such as attorneys or court appointed special advocates (CASA) workers look for family members, instead of their social workers. One young person stated, *"You have a lawyer don't you? That's who looked for my family."*

Not surprisingly, a number of youth reported that many of their family members did not even know that they were in foster care to begin with. This was unfortunate because some of the youth wanted to be placed with family, but no one from their child welfare agency was willing, or able, to contact potential family members to let them know that the youth was in foster care and needing a placement. These youth stated that when reunification was the case plan goal the social worker did not explore family placement options for the youth. For example, one female participant stated,

Yeah, I wanted to be placed with my dad's side of the family or my mom's mother, my grandmother, or someone else, because it was just our mom that was the only person we knew. Nobody else stepped up or nobody knew we was in foster care - after I got out everyone didn't even know. I mean I would ask family members and they never knew that I was in foster care. But, I didn't talk about it with my social worker because the focus was for me to return to my mom.

Youth Not Wanting To Be Placed with Family

There were some participants who did have their social workers try to pursue connections and placements with family members while the youth were still in foster care. However, these connections did not happen because some youth were not interested in making the connection. Perhaps the youth were not emotionally or psychologically prepared to interact with family, or perhaps there was stigma attached to being in foster care. One male participant stated,

The placement process was respectful of my needs, but it was nobody's fault but my parent's fault. My social worker and attorney were respectful about what was going on in my personal life with my family. I wanted to try, but it didn't happen, it wasn't right and I felt it was unfit for me because I felt like I was going to be the one taking care of them. My needs were respected.

It is unclear how the social workers could have better helped prepare the youth. For instance, counseling and emotional support could be a part of the process, to help youth manage all of their intense emotions about meeting and interacting with their family members. This female participant also did not want to connect with her mother:

Social workers tried to get me connected to other adults in my life, like my mom, but I didn't want to pursue it. I guess my social workers did their part,

if I had wanted to further it, they would have wanted to further it. But, I didn't want to.

Given the new push in child welfare for Family Finding services to investigate possible kin placements, it is important to keep in mind that some youth are developmentally ready to give their opinion about living with a family member or not. This young woman stated that she told her social worker clearly that she did not want to live with family. She actually found another adult in her community that was willing to take her in. The placement was approved and she was able to move in:

We knew about family finding, but I didn't ever really look into it. I didn't really want to live with my family. My social worker did ask me about it though.

It is not clear that when social workers are trained in permanency planning, whether they are told to continuously ask (i.e. periodically over the course of months or years) about family and other connections, since young people may change their minds throughout their time in foster care. Unfortunately, foster care youth may change their minds after it is too late to try to contact family, such as after the youth has left foster care, when they may have very little or no resources to conduct a search on their own. For example, this participant reported not wanting to find family while in care and then later regretting the decision:

They said yeah, you gonna be in a foster home' til you're 18. At that point I just wanted to get my high school diploma and get out; I didn't even trip about family. I didn't try to look for them either I wish I would have like all those times like looking back in my days now being in the system I wish I did go look for them cause that would have gave me more motivation and

more comfort instead of being group home to group home I would have some sort of family to talk to.

Preparation for Placements or Connections With Family / Other Adults

I mean like my SW it wasn't a priority, like they always was thinking about what was going on now, they didn't think of long term, what like having a family member could have improved my situation and things that I was going through at that time, they was just trying to solve that problem, they wasn't thinking for my future or how family is important. Like only thing they thought of was our mom, they didn't think about anybody else. (male participant)

The young person who made the statement above clearly had a negative experience with his social worker when it came to helping him find and maintain emotional connections with adults in his life. There were many other participants in this study who also did not feel as supported by their social worker during this process.

When youth do not want to pursue emotional connections with family members or other adults it may raise the question of whether youth are adequately prepared to do so. That is, when social workers find family members, or other adults for youth to connect with, it is unclear how adequately youth are emotionally prepared for the interaction. They may be fearful of immediate or later rejection, loss, or just simply not making a strong connection with the other person. This may be especially true for youth who are going to meet with, or live with, their biological parents (who were not the perpetrators of abuse or neglect) or other family members if there is tension or conflict in the family system.

In addition, some youth reported a lack of preparation when social workers were investigating which family member a youth could live with. For example, some social workers found family members for youth to be placed with, but did not probe into whether these individuals had already been contacted as a placement option for the youth in the past (i.e. with a different social worker) and had chosen not to take the youth. By having a new social worker discuss this family member as a potential option for housing could set the youth up for intense feelings of rejection, ambiguous loss (Samuels, 2009), and grief. This young man stated,

> *When they told me that I had my uncle here I already knew it, because the reason I ever went into foster care was because my uncle didn't want to take care of me anymore. And when they found him they called him first thing he said was, "Oh I don't want him." After about a month they told me, "We can't locate nobody in your family no more."*

Similarly, some youth reported that their social workers offered them and their family members no preparation with the family finding and placement process. For example, one young man who was placed from another state reported,

> *They tried to locate family and they located my uncle and the last thing he told me was, 'Man I'm not taking care of you, you're not under my guardianship, you were just sent out here from New Orleans.' I was living with my uncle before I went into the system, so when they were like, "We found your uncle," I was like oh can you guys talk to him? He didn't want me no more.*

Another young woman wanted to be placed with an adult that she knew in the community. With the assistance of her social worker, the youth was able to do so. However, over time the

youth found that the placement was not appropriate (due to chaos in the home) and she again had to move placements in her last year of high school. It is unclear how thoroughly the social worker investigated the placement beforehand and whether the adult was given support if needed. The young person reported,

> *I ended up moving in with someone that I wanted to live with, but I ended up moving back into foster care because it got, like, crazy. It would have been crazy [to have stayed] because I had to finish school at my high school. So, my senior year I moved into another placement.*

Similarly, this female participant described her experience in getting placed with her father who was not ready to take her back due to substance abuse issues. Again, due to lack of preparation by the social worker, the placement with family did not work out:

> *They tried to reunify me with my father, I went there on a 30-day trial, but on the night of my court date he was drunk and he put his hands on me, but it didn't work. I told my social worker I wanted to reunify with my mom or dad. They sent me back and forth with visits. I flew to NY to see my dad. I told them I was okay with visits, but that I did not want to live with him. My SW was respectful of what I wanted.*

Similarly, this female participant discussed being reunified with her mother, who was not prepared to take her and her brother back home. She wanted to return home to her mother, but in looking back she realizes that her mother was not ready to raise two children due to her mental health issues. The participant also mentions that her social worker did nothing to emotionally prepare her and her brother with the reunification:

> *I wanted to go home so bad so I didn't care how we went back home. But now thinking about it, I think they should have did steps to lead her up to like taking two kids in that she really didn't raise. She never took care of kids our age before so she didn't know how to do that then she became pregnant and our mom is Bipolar so she has to take medication so when she got pregnant she couldn't take her medication so things that we did irritated her. They should have prepared her for it, but they didn't. We knew that in a couple weeks we was going home, but there was no, we just knew we was going home on that day. Like they was coming to pick us up on that day.*

Another potential conflict that can affect a placement can be a lack of understanding about expectations between a foster youth and his/her care providers about being able talk to birth parents while in placement. One female participant thought that her contact with her mother was causing conflict in her kin placement with her aunt:

> *The first time I was in there I was placed with my aunt. I don't know what they told my aunt, but we couldn't have communication with my mother. And then I don't know what happened, maybe a disagreement, but they took us to Sacramento. My social worker didn't prepare me to live with my aunt. We really didn't feel uncomfortable because we knew her before. So, we didn't trip and we really didn't start getting aware of it until we couldn't talk to our mom.*

A few participants reported that they were not clear whether they were supposed to be able to talk to birth parents or other family members. They thought that some contact with family resulted in their actually losing a placement with foster parents. For example, this female participant thought her foster parents were unhappy with her contacting her birthmother:

> *I tried reuniting with my mom but that didn't happen because she was still under the influence of drugs. I started visiting my mom when I was in the foster home and the foster parents didn't really like that so they kicked me out.*

Some of the participants expressed fear about having contact with, or being placed with, family members. Foster care youth may not always express their fears because they may not want the placement to fail, they may not feel as if they have a choice, or they may not trust their social workers enough to do so. One male participant reported that he did not discuss his fears with his social worker:

> *I was more scared than anything because I was out here by myself, so when they said, "We're gonna try to find family for you," I never had my hopes up I knew there was no way you guys can find nobody from my town out here to come get me - you guys can't find my mom and dad. So I was more on the scared side, but then I was like when I first got out here, right when I got out here, I was like it smells like money out here. I just want to get my high school diploma and go home, I didn't even care after that point.*

It has been illustrated in a few research studies that placement moves can be detrimental to foster care youth (see Leathers, 2002; Newton, Litrownik, and Landsver, 2000) especially if they have not been adequately emotionally prepared for such moves. Unrau, Seita, and Putney (2008) conducted in depth qualitative interviews with 22 former foster care youth about how multiple placement moves while they were in foster care affected their later lives. Participants reported that multiple placement moves had lasting detrimental impact on present day lives, such as emotional loss and trust issues with others (Unrau et al., 2008, p. 1263). A male participant from this study

describes how he received no preparation with an abrupt placement move and how that affected him emotionally and socially:

> *I remember I was in a group home at the Oakland hills, Skyline Blvd. and next thing you know I see this big brown van pulling up and my foster mom was like, "Oh I forgot to tell you, you know your uncle is coming to get you today." And I've never met this guy before. And she was like "I think they're right outside" and they beeped the horn. Bags were already packed you know. No goodbye. She was like, "Ok have a nice life make sure if you get successful you have me to thank I was your first placement." I was just finally getting used to this one home, finally getting new friends. And I get moved from Oakland to Vallejo just like that.*

Some participants reported that their social workers did prepare them for placement with relatives. A few youth had a short period of time to "check out" a potential placement before a final decision was made. This youth felt that she had a voice in process:

> *Yeah I guess they prepared us, they sent us out there gave us two weeks to let us know what it would be like if we actually lived there, and we had been out there previous to that the summer. We went there a few times, but yeah I guess they prepared us, I don't remember, there was no special meetings or anything like that.*

Only one participant reported having a more structured preparation process to be placed with family, such as counseling. However, this female participant did say that although she thought the counseling was helpful, it would have been more helpful if her social worker had helped her mother with more tangible services such as substance abuse treatment and connections to employment. Unfortunately, she was not able to be

reunified with her mother because her mother could not get stable enough to take her back:

> *My social worker helped me with counseling to prepare me to live with my family members. It was my understanding that my mom had a sickness with drugs and alcohol. My dad did improve on stopping drinking alcohol, but I still didn't want to go and live with him. But, it was the simple fact that I did not want to take on the responsibility to make sure that he didn't. The counseling helped me recognize my parents' diseases instead of it being my fault. So, that how it was. My social worker could have helped by putting my mom in rehab, helped her clean up her act, helped her get a better job or a job. I feel like they could have helped her more, and if they had done more to help my family it could have been better for me. We could have reunited.*

Preparation is also related to having youth prepared to move to a vastly different area for a new placement (either when first being placed or when there is a placement disruption). When foster care youth are offered a placement or are physically placed, in areas outside of their neighborhoods and communities it can be difficult for them. They may have to move to a different area, possibly out of the county or the state, and consequently leave friends, schools, and areas that they are comfortable with and used to. One participant was told what city he might be placed in and given the option to reject the placement:

> *They were like do you have any other family and the only people I could think of were my auntie and my grandpa's sister, they live in Oakland, they found them but I told them I didn't want to go because I, at that point I was scared of Oakland. I was so new, I was just scared even the name Oakland you know I was like oh man do I really want to go live out there. I just said for myself because I'm from the south and I read so many stories about it. I was like no I'm not gonna take the risk so I was like I'll stay in county or put me in a group home or something. Yeah they wanted me to move to*

Oakland, but I declined because I was more scared, it was out of my comfort zone I'll say.

Having a Choice with Placements or Contact with Family

Not surprisingly, there were some youth that reported that they did not have a choice about whether to live with family members or not. Simply put, one participant said, *"I wasn't allowed to live with any family members."* It is unclear about whether this participant discussed with her social worker potential family members who were not those who were her initial caregivers. Other participants reported not feeling that they, or their siblings had a choice in terms of where to be placed. This male participant thought that adolescents should sometimes have a say about where they are placed, especially if they do not like where they are currently placed:

I don't like the way my little brother's being treated right now and he doesn't like living there so I'm just like if he doesn't like living there and she acts like she doesn't want him there and he doesn't want to be there, he's like 13-14 he's a freshman and I think he should have a say in where he wants to live. He's old enough, he's at that point, I know I felt the same way, when you're that old you know what you want to do you know where you want to live, if you don't like it there you shouldn't have to stay somewhere, isn't that the whole reason they have us in the system?

There were a few participants in the study who were placed in out-of-home placements through Juvenile Probation. They all felt as though they did not have any sort of choice with which family members they lived with. In fact, most stated that they were forced to live in a group home even though a family placement in another area may have been available and better for them. It is unclear if the decision about their placements came from the judge presiding over their care, or if their social worker could have recommended another placement, such as with family:

> *My experience was real negative all the way around. I wasn't in foster care, but I was placed in a group home because of my outstanding criminal activity, so I couldn't go back home. But, I couldn't stay with my mother, I couldn't stay with my father, I guess my social worker didn't want me to be with no family, I guess she wanted me to go to a group home and experience that. But, it's like I didn't have no bad record, or none of that, so I didn't see why I couldn't go live with my father in another city.*

There were some participants who were satisfied with their placements with family, mainly because they felt they had a choice and a voice in the process. This young female participant was quite pleased with her experience with her social worker because she alone was able to choose which family member she wanted to live with:

> *My experience was perfect because she [my social worker] let me choose which family member that I wanted to stay with.*

Connections to Siblings Who Were Also in Foster Care

Although there has been much discussion about foster care youth having connections to family while in care, there is something unique about the relationships they have with siblings who are also placed in foster care. Children placed together offer the continuance of the child's own family life, which can be critical in a child's adjustment to a new home (Groza et al., 2003, p. 482). There have been a number of studies in the last two decades examining the outcomes of siblings placed in foster care.

Some young people are placed with their siblings while in care, while others experience the difficulty of being placed away from their siblings. Many studies have found that siblings that are

placed together while in care have better outcomes than those who are placed in separate placements (see Thorpe and Swart, 1992; Drapeau, Simard, Beaudry, & Charbonneau, 2000; Smith, 1998). Yet, many young people experience a placement disruption that includes not being able to live with a sibling(s). Staff and Fein (1992) found that 70 percent of the children in their study were placed with siblings initially, but only half were still placed together at the end of the study period (between 1976 and 1990).

One female participant discussed her experience with demanding to be placed with her two younger sisters. She was an older adolescent at the time of the placement so perhaps she was a stronger advocate for herself because of her age or maturity. She also mentions how her social worker did explore family placements for her and her siblings, but that due to the fact there were three of them, it was more difficult to secure a family placement that would take all of them. In fact, she reported it was also difficult to find a non-kin placement that would take all three of them:

> *The second time I was in foster care a similar thing happened to us, me and my two siblings. The second time I was in I was 17 and my sister had just turned 16 and my younger sister was like 10 or 11. As soon as we got to the placement center they said they would be looking for a home for us, but they couldn't find it and they were going to split us up. And we were like, no you can't split us up. They said they couldn't find a house big enough for us, because there is three of us. They were like, we have to split you up. So we spent the night in the placement center over night. They did ask us about being placed with family, but my family wasn't in contact or on good terms with my mother – they didn't get along at that time. So they contacted my aunt, but she couldn't do it because of financial and she didn't have a big enough place. They didn't want to go to my uncle because he lived all the way in Sacramento and that was too far because we were in Oakland. They said our dad, but we didn't want to live with our dad because we didn't know our dad.*

Many youth in this study experienced being permanently separated from siblings due to the inability for some placements to take all of the siblings. One participant chose not to live at his grandmother's house (a kin placement) with his other younger siblings because he understood that she was not able to adequately handle that number of children in the same house:

> *For me it was like, let's see, I have 7 brothers and sisters, two of them have been adopted and they live in some other state, I forget where, and I have a older brother who's been in and out of group homes, in and out of jail all that so he's just messing up all across the board. The reason I didn't go stay with my grandma is because I understood more, I understood that she can't, 'cause we lived with my grandma when we first went into foster care, I understand that she can't take care of all of us by herself like she's not capable of doing that, there's too many of us so me and my older brother we decided were older, we know what's going on, we can handle ourselves. We can live with somebody else and its fine so she needs to take the younger ones in if anything.*

Many participants in the study discussed their experiences with having siblings adopted or placed far away from them while in foster care. As aforementioned, none of the study participants were adopted while in foster care, but the distance between the siblings' placements may have contributed to their emotional stress. In 2007 the Center for Social Services Research (CSSR) examined the distance from all foster care youth's home address to their first placement address; these youth had been in care for more than twelve months. The researchers found this percentage of youth were placed 11+ miles from home for kin placements: 1) Alameda - 31%, 2) Contra Costa – 28% and 3) Santa Clara – 43%. For non-kin placements it was: 1) Alameda - 50%, 2) Contra

Costa – 48% and 3) Santa Clara – 43% (Needell et al., 2009). These are very high percentages of youth placed many miles away from their communities, neighborhood, schools and families.

One male participant described his experience of being placed with his sister while in care (they also had a brother in foster care) and how they lost all contact with each other as a result of changes in placements and the adoption process. Clearly, the social worker of the study participant did not follow-up with the participant's sister or brother's social worker to maintain contact. It is unclear who is ultimately responsible for bringing the siblings together for face-to-face meetings, especially when the siblings are placed so far away from each other and may have different social workers. The male participant stated,

> *What happened was my sister and I were always placed together and then we got a court order to always be placed together and then a couple months after that we were already in this placement and they kicked me out and they kicked my little sister out a year or so later and then I haven't seen my little sisters for like 6 years. She got adopted from the system. At one point I was living in Antioch, my sister was in Sacramento, my brother was in Ukiah, and my two sisters were in Oakland so we were like all over and now all of us, I live in san Jose, my three sisters live in Oakland and my brother lives in Los Angeles.*

Similarly, this male participant mentioned how he was placed extremely far away from both his brother and sister. In fact, he and his siblings were placed in various counties throughout Northern and Southern California. This participant's experience illustrates an outcome from the Wulczyn and Zimmerman (2005) study which shows that when siblings are placed in foster care on different days they are more likely to be in separate placements, as compared with siblings

placed in foster care on the same day. This participant does mention that he was able to meet with his sister, and that she had to be flown up to Oakland to see him:

> *My brother he was in the system before I was. But then I got in the system. They placed him so far, they placed him in like San Bernadino. My little sister, they just got out like 2 months. They had her all they way in Los Angeles. When she was able to get a visit or whatever, they had to fly her out here and fly her back.*

Many participants in the study reported not knowing why they were unable to be placed with, or meet with, their siblings while in foster care. They felt as though their social workers simply did not communicate with them enough about their foster care rights and/or needs. For example, this male participant stated,

> *My brother and I were separated. My brother was in the system before I was. I was juiced to see my brother. So I called my social worker to see if I could move in with my brother. And, they wouldn't let it happen for whatever reason. They wouldn't let me live with my brother and they wouldn't let my brother live with me. They didn't tell me why. I just think the social worker was keeping me away from my family, my immediate family. They were placing me away from my siblings and didn't give me any explanation. They wouldn't even help me get in contact with him. I never knew about my foster care rights. I was never taught about that from my social worker.*

Possibly due to lack of information from social workers, some youth developed their own theories about why they were not placed with their siblings to help maintain family connections. This female participant hypothesized,

> *They usually say they won't place a kid with her brothers and sisters because of AWOLing. Like if one is at a group home and the other is at foster home and they place them both together and they can leave together. I knew of this girl and her brother. They got to live together. They earned money and saved money, and then they just left, and now they are wandering the streets. So I guess they try to keep the safety of you not being with your family, which is kinda wrong in a sense. But in another sense would have to think about what a child will think, "okay like this is my family, but we want to get out of here and live on our own." And, then they can be in danger.*

A few participants talked about becoming a legal guardian to their younger siblings when they themselves aged out of foster care. If appropriate, sibling legal guardianship could provide for stability and permanency for the family. However, some participants felt as though their social workers did not assist them with pursuing that option, or preparing them to eventually be a legal guardian, and they did not know why:

> *One of the reasons that we were in foster care was because my little sister and my mom don't get along and I could do independent living and then when I turned 18 in 3 months I could take my sister with me if I was stable in the program. But, no one helped me, so I did the best I can.*

Multiple Placements – Resulting in a Lack of Permanency

One can imagine that moving in and out of placements while being in the foster care system can affect a young person's ability to stay connected to family, make and maintain friendships, as well as begin emotional connections to other adults in their community. This male participant describes his experience with moving multiple times and not being allowed to stay connected to his siblings:

> *I was moved hecka times, like half the times I would find out like that moment and just have to come home and bags would be packed. One time I didn't even get to come home my bags were packed and in the car. That's when my sisters were there and I didn't get to say bye or anything.*

The youth in the study also discussed how multiple placements could affect relationships and permanent connections. Many youth reported having strong emotional ties to their foster parents, but then had to move placements. This may have dramatically affected the youth's ability to develop permanent emotional connections with adults in a new community. This young woman felt like her foster mom treated her like family,

> *They moved me away from my foster mom too. My first foster mom always treated me like I was her daughter.*

Some participants did not understand why they had to move placements, and hypothesized about why they had to move and leave a potentially strong emotional connection with their care providers. This lack of understanding may be due to little or no communication between the youth and their social workers. One female participant assumed that her social worker did not like the fact that she had connected to her foster mom and stated,

> *My social worker, she didn't like it so much that I connected so well with my foster mom. And, I just saw her yesterday too. But, I connected so well with her that she hated the fact that I had a bond with her so she took me to Modesto with an uppity group home.*

Another female participant made a similar assumption,

They took me away from my foster mom too. I was placed with this lady and she always treated me like her daughter. But they took me away from her.

Type of Placements Affecting Relational Permanency

The type of placement may greatly affect whether foster care youth can develop permanent emotional connections with family and other adults. Obviously, if a foster care youth is placed with family until they age out they are more likely to maintain those relationships and emotional connections after leaving care. Most of the participants who were placed with family said it was a positive experience. Also, those who had siblings stated that when they were in placements where they could live, or have contact with, their siblings it was very helpful:

I had a really good experience. My foster family would take me with them all over the world. I never saw my SW. I lived with [my foster mom] from 3 to 18 and lived in New Orleans. We called her Aunt Carrie. I called her Mom. She actually got Guardianship of me because we were tired of seeing social workers. I haven't seen her in awhile, but I want to talk to her. She did a lot for me. When my brothers were in foster care homes, she got it so they could come and stay with us. One of my brothers, he was a real bad ass and on probation, and stayed in group homes. But, he could come and stay with me until all the way. The county workers got it all set up for us.

Yet, many youth who had group home placements or more strict foster home placements discussed having limits that included not being able to leave the residence, except for attending school. They believed that those limits may have affected their ability with developing permanent emotional connections with family members and others because they could not go places easily. One youth noted,

> *You had to stay at home in group homes. If you wanted to go to the park, they had to walk you to the park and stay there.*

Another youth talked about not being able to see his siblings or other family members because of limits or restrictions in his group homes. When he was previously placed in foster home placements he had much more freedom:

> *When I went from my foster home to my group home – you know at the foster home it'd be different, you used to be able to do what you want. When I got to that group home they wouldn't let me go nowhere. I couldn't visit my uncle, I couldn't go visit my sister in San Francisco. They were like, we don't have permission from your social worker and we don't got fingerprints and background checks. And, I am like, that is ridiculous.*

When foster care youth live in out-of-home placements they are able to meet with family members only when it is approved by the placement provider and the youth's social worker. The social worker has to provide a home pass that they sign off on for approval. Many youth in this study described home passes as an integral part of helping them stay connected to family members, even extended family members:

> *The best thing the group home staff did for me was allow me to have my home pass. See my cousins and kickin' and chill and go back to the group home.*

Another female participant reported not being able to secure home passes from her social worker. Therefore, she was not able to contact her mother while in care, except for one face-to-face visit:

> *The weekend home passes, I didn't have that. Even though one time I went to Oakland voluntarily and [my social worker] asked if I wanted to meet my mom. We only met with her for like an hour. But, other times of the week if we asked to meet with our mother we couldn't and we couldn't even call her.*

Similarly, a male participant reflected on his experience with living in a foster care placement with a great deal of structure. He felt as though that experience seriously affected his ability to have contact, and connect with family members such as his siblings:

> *But then when I got a new social worker and was living at a new place with an older lady. I couldn't go out on the weekend. I couldn't spend time with my family, I couldn't even take rides with my older sister to go and see my little sister. So, just little stuff like that, my social worker was hecka over protective and everything. I couldn't do nothing.*

Out-of-county placements are common in the California child welfare system (Needell et al., 2009). The distance that foster care youth are placed away from their communities may contribute to why some youth are not able to maintain family connections while in care. For example, the distance could possibly contribute to the social worker not really getting to know the youth and their specific needs. This participant stated,

> *Social workers don't get to know the youth and so the youth have a hard time getting to know the social worker because the social worker is placing the youth outside of the county, somewhere far from their family or their siblings or their community and they are out their on their own and not knowing what to do.*

This participant thought that out-of-county placements could be very helpful to a young person if the experience was positive. However, she was clear that those types of placements had to involve much contact with family, even if it was by phone:

> *If you are going to take someone all the way up there (a group home near the Oregon border), and they'll have a good experience, I think it is worth it. As long as you keep them up with communication with their family. If they have that communication.*

This participant felt that his group home placements emulated a home environment for him, but he understood that all foster care youth often do not have the same experience:

> *I was involved a lot in my group home and helped out with other kids – I would interact with them if they were getting emotional and tried to help calm them down. It was kinda like home – it's all how you make it and how your attitude is.*

Other participants discussed a sense of raising themselves in group home placements. Some found a feeling of home, but others reported not having a normal childhood in these placements, and growing up on their own. These experiences illustrate that youth who live in group homes may have very different perceptions of relationships, attachment and permanency than youth who are raised by foster parents in their homes. This male participant stated,

> *I didn't really find myself, who I was, cuz I am still looking, but it did help me understand like life. Like you are growing up real fast, you're in a group home, so you really take care of yourself. They take care of you, but you really doin' things for yourself, for real. Especially at a young age.*

This young man was first placed with family (his grandmother and brother), but was then placed in group homes. He describes a similar experience of feeling as though he was in charge of his own growth, learning, and development during adolescence because of his group home placements:

> *The first one was my grandmother, the second one tried was my brother, but I mostly just lived in group homes and raised myself. I basically remembered learning everything myself. I couldn't let anything pull me down or hold me back. I had to stay focused, kinda like a lot of older males around here.*

It is important to mention the aspect of safety when discussing group home placements. Safety may be related to physical safety, emotional safety, and the safety of one's belongings. Many foster youth move throughout the system with few personal belongings and those items can be put in jeopardy in placements housing multiple youth, like group homes. For some young people, being violated by having personal items taken by other youth can make the placement seem even *less* like a safe family home. This male participant described the chaos of group homes and the fear many young people have about the safety of their belongings:

> *In group homes, it is like crazy. You have to watch your back all the time and you gotta keep an eye out for everything, especially when you go to sleep. Because people may be going through your stuff.*

Youth Mental Health Issues Can Affect Permanency

> *There are a lot of kids who emotions coming up and down. And, they have their personal problems. They need that social worker to get them through life. (female participant)*

Research has shown that foster care youth suffer from mental health issues more frequently than youth in the general population (see Pecora, Jensen, Romanelli, Jackson and Ortiz, 2009). Therefore, it is important to note that whether youth develop and maintain family and adult relational permanence may be affected by the youth's mental health status and resulting behaviors.

Many youth in this study mentioned the unique emotional and behavioral needs of foster care youth. This male participant used the term, "going off" to refer to a young person's behavior and how that behavior might affect the relationship with the social worker. For example, youth behavior might affect how the social worker sees the youth and develops rapport with the youth, which in turn might affect whether and how the social worker works with the youth around building connections with other adults in care:

> *If the child is going off……then you need to realize that you may not know anything about them. It is people skills. Make that child feel comfortable with you. Whatever you do don't try to make the child feel like you came from a good home and he or she came from a broken home and you're much better. That can easily be portrayed not just in words, but in actions. I have actually seen a lot of social workers, it is a look, if you have a passion about that child and you want to know about that child you can feel it.*

Similarly, this participant believes that foster care youth are vulnerable and perhaps need extra support and understanding from their social workers:

> *Social workers should understand that a lot of youth who are in the system are very vulnerable when they come in and so social workers don't understand that when you don't communicate with the youth or you neglect, that can cause more hurt than help. That can make things even worse. That could be why youth run away. I wanted to run away.*

Some participants were much more clear about the mental health issues of foster care youth. This female participant discussed the high rates of suicidal ideation among foster care youth and how it may be related to youth not being in contact with family:

> *When you're young and you see other people with their families and you're like, 'where's my mom? Where's my dad? Where's my sisters and why aren't we together?' I feel for people, because my situation even though it is still kind of shaky, it could have been worse, way worse. I've met people who have committed suicide since I've known them. All somebody said to them was that they were or ugly or little stuff like that and they committed suicide over little things like that. Because of everything that just built up around them and I think if you approach a child or a teen before it reaches that point, you could put a stop to it. Suicide would not be an issue. Suicide has a lot to do with them feeling unwanted and un-needed.*

Mentors in the Community as Permanent Connections

> *Mentorship is the key to whole foster care system. I really think that foster care youth need mentors, every last one of them. Whether they want one or not, they all need mentors. I think if they had mentors or felt like someone care about them, you would have less teen pregnancies, less teen suicide, teens smoking cigarettes, drinking. (female participant)*

It is clear that mentors can help older foster care youth (see Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan & Lozano, 2008). Munson and McMillen (2008) examined the psychosocial outcomes of older foster care youth who had mentors. The researchers found that the presence of a mentor and the duration of the relationship at age 18 were associated with better psychological outcomes, less stress, and more satisfaction with life for the foster care youth sample (p. 104). In addition,

Munson and McMillen (2008) found that when compared to youth without a mentor, youth with a natural mentor had less stress and were less likely to have been arrested by age 19.

Almost all participants in this study who had mentors reported very positive experiences with the relationship, both while they were in foster care and after they left care. For example, this male participant spoke of how his relationship with his mentor is supportive and how it continues to this day:

> *My mentor will text me every day and ask me how I'm doing. But he's a real good friend still to this day, and he taught me a lot, I think he is the one who taught me a lot of stuff as a man you know it's either be bad all you want and go that route but I won't be here but you come successful everyone's gonna be here you know your mom's gonna be here.*

Mentors offered youth advice with life's decisions, provided emotional support, created a sense of belonging, assisted with career exploration, and offered tangible support with the transition out of foster care and in to adulthood. This male participant continues to receive much support from his mentor, even after leaving care:

> *I still deal with him [my mentor]. Basically if I need anything or have any questions or long-term investments he is the guy that I can go to, answer to and he will look to invest in my ideas. I had him and I participated a lot in my group home.*

Not surprisingly, some participants noted that their mentors would also offer tangible financial support, such as buying daily living necessities like clothes and food. This support is often provided to the youth after they have aged out of care:

I met an adult mentor through respite. Now we can go to her for anything like if we need our clothes washed she lets us use her washing machine, she'll take us shopping. Yeah she bought us all coats, and what she did for me she bought my sister something so when I went to Seattle that year it was my first year going back since I been in California and she bought my niece something, my little sister something, my grandma something and my mom something. She really hooked us up. And every year when our birthday comes around she asks us, "What meal would you want for your dinner?" And she makes it for us. For me she's that one person that tugs when I need to be tugged. Sometimes she gets really concerned like I tell her something and then I have social workers calling me saying, "Anytime you want to set up an appointment with a therapist."

Some youth had developed long-term relationships with other adults in their lives that were not traditional mentors, but were legal advocates such as Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA). CASA workers are private citizens who volunteer their time to be advocates for children and youth in foster care. They are appointed by judges to watch over and advocate for foster care youth to make sure they do not get lost in the legal and child welfare systems (National CASA, 12 June, 2009). Most counties in California have CASA chapters and link as many children as possible with advocates. Often CASA workers are given to younger children in foster care, who do not have the language or cognitive skills to advocate for themselves during the court process. Recently there has been more of a push in the CASA community to have adolescents who were placed in foster care at an older age become connected with CASA workers. Yet, this is often difficult because the lack of CASA volunteers available (M. Moses, personal communication, 2007, date unknown). Yet, sometimes CASA workers can become informal mentors for adolescents if they have kept the same worker for many years. Participants in this study reported

having very positive and supportive relationships with their CASA workers, such as this male participant:

> *One mentor is my CASA worker. He is like a friend I can call anytime day or night. He actually took me out a lot, encouraged me a lot; it was bad times and good times to push the negative out.*

This male participant describes how the relationship with his CASA worker changed from being more formal to more of a mentor/friendship because the worker began to offer helpful advice and tangible support (like a social worker) to the youth:

> *My advocate [a CASA worker] and I call each other we can go out to eat. There was this one moment when I knew he was not gonna be my advocate no more, he was gonna become my friend. I was in the group home and I got in trouble I was about to get kicked out and he ran to my house the next morning came and picked me up drove around. Gave me my motto, he said, "You're like a fork in the road you can go this route where you can be successful and have kids and all that or you can go the bad route where you're not successful you go to jail and yeah I'll be your friend for a good like five or six years but I don't think I'm gonna last that long. But if you go the other route will stay with you through thick and thin I don't care if you got bills to pay whatever," and since then I knew him not as my advocate no more but as my friend. To this day I think he was like my true social worker because he put in the effort for me to get where I'm at today. He the one that really got me the meetings and the resources for what I got today. He worked in the county building so he talked to my lawyer about finding family he talked to my lawyer about putting me in the right placement. He was like my real social worker, I could call him.*

Similarly, this male participant discusses how a former foster brother of his had developed a very strong relationship to his CASA worker. After five years of a relationship, the CASA worker is now seen as family to the former foster brother:

> *Like my former foster brother, which he lives here in the dorms he's about 5 floors below me, we are real tight I call him my brother. He had an advocate and he calls her sister he's had her for about 4-5 years and they really just have a bond like even now they go out. Him, his girlfriend, her husband and her, they still go out now, they go out to eat. Yeah like before he makes big decisions, like before he goes to the airport, he talks to her about it. Even though she has no control over anything it's just like she's there for him and they have that bond. It's really like his sister, he really cares for her and she really cares for him and she cares about what happens to him and things like that.*

There were a few discussions with the participants about how culture may play a role in the amount and type of relationships they may build with adults while in foster care. One young woman said that when she was approached by CASA to get connected with a worker she stated that she wanted her CASA worker to be of a specific race, but she got another individual instead:

> *I wanted a black CASA worker, but got an African white man instead.*

Some youth reported having tried to secure mentors while they were in foster care, but that they were not able to get connected to one. For example, this young man stated,

> *I tried to get an advocate so many times, which is what I think you're talking about an advocate which is like a mentor, like an older brother type thing and that never happened.*

Other participants thought that their social worker waited too long to get them linked to a mentor. For example, on participant said, "*My first conversation about having a mentor happened at age 18."* While other participants were clearly disappointed because they never had a mentor while in foster care and never had their social worker try to connect them with one. This participant simply stated,

> *My social worker never tried to find a mentor for me. I even had the same social worker for a while.*

But, many youth were very enthusiastic about the chance to develop a relationship with a mentor in the community, because they did not have anyone to communicate with out of the child welfare system. This male participant stated,

> *I was hooked up with my advocate through my lawyer because after court that day they asked me right there do you want an advocate. I was like I don't know what that is and they were like, "Mentor, guidance." Right then and there I said yes cause I was scared I don't have nobody out here so I just wanted someone to talk to cause I knew my social worker wasn't going to, I had a feeling right then and there.*

Interestingly, some participants stated that their social worker did not coordinate their mentor relationship, but that their group home staff set up the connection. This raises the issue of who is ultimately responsible for ensuring that older foster care youth develop permanent adult connections while they are still in care.

> *When I was in a group home they wanted to get us hooked up with a mentor – someone to talk to, to support us, and to give us that extra push.*

And, I just said yeah, yeah. And, ever since then I have had a good mentor.

A few other participants mentioned that they felt their mentor was their attorney. This female participant had a very close relationship with her attorney; and was even able to spend the night at her attorney's house when she had passes to leave placement. This close, mentoring relationship even continues today, well after the young person has left foster care:

When I was growing up my attorney was my mentor. She was my attorney when I was 8 and we became friends. She let me spend the night at her house when I had my weekend passes. She was the one that mostly was there for me. I still talk to her.

Social Workers as Mentors and Permanent Adult Connections

Social workers are often seen as major social support for youth in foster care. Samuels (2008) found that 18 of 29 youth interviewed put their current or past social worker down on a social network map that illustrated all types of social support for the youth. As one can imagine, many participants in this study reported that their social worker was a permanent emotional connection for them:

My first permanent connection with an adult was with my social worker.

Many participants stated that they still had contact with their social workers, even a few years after leaving care. One youth stated, "*My social worker was pretty much was my mentor, and still is."* Another female participant reported that she still has really close contact with her social worker, who talks to her on the phone and gives her updates on how her siblings are doing:

My social worker and I mail like once a week and I talk to her on the phone probably like once every 3 months but I email her and she responds, she always keeps me updated with my siblings' visits with our, their biological parents.

Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP) social workers are also of great support and take on a mentorship-type role with the former foster care youth in this study. Often, ILSP workers have more frequent contact with former foster youth than a regular social worker because the youth may be accessing ILSP services on a regular basis. This participant talked about how his ILSP worker specifically assists him and offers "friendship" and support since leaving foster care:

I still have a relationship with my ILSP worker, even though he is not my social worker anymore we still keep in contact. He still comes and gets me, takes me to lunch. He is really awesome. I haven't talked to him recently because I have been so busy with school and stuff but when I call him he is always there; always. He usually calls every once in a while just to make sure everything is okay, how I'm doing, how I'm doing in school; if there is any way he can help. He is my friend, that is my guide, that is my friend; I love him. He is the person I could truly say stands out among most people I know.

Similarly, this male participant discussed how his ILSP worker is someone who cares and would go to great measures to offer the former foster care youth a lot of support:

He worked so hard for me; did everything he possibly could to make me happy and he didn't have to. He would go to the extremes; that made a big difference as opposed to someone who stands on the corner who has no mom who cares about them, no dad who cares about them. Nobody at all, you know what I mean. That makes a big difference in teens' lives.

This young woman talked about how her social worker would take her clothes shopping, to get a haircut and to a doctor's appointment. We typically think of these personal experiences as things a person does with a family member. This social worker even went so far as to want to offer her home as a placement for the participant, but the county did not allow it:

> *I had the best social worker. She was white. She lived in Sacramento but worked out here. She would drive to see me. I lived in Modesto and every Friday she would come and meet me and take me out. She would take me shopping, get my hair done, she made sure my doctors appointments were up to date. When she tried to get guardianship of me in Alameda County they told her no because I was black and she was white. They also said it was because she worked for Alameda County and she couldn't have a former foster youth come and live with her. And she said that she wanted to adopt me and they said you can't do it.*

Social workers can also take on a parental role with foster care youth. By offering advice, providing support, and being an emotional care provider, the role can change from service provider to "family" support:

> *My social worker would give me advice about money about not going to crazy parties, he would be there like a parent and he would everyday he would call me, where you at? I'm coming to get you. You know just like a parent would. And that's how I feel a social worker should do to them instead of just taking the kid out to eat, take them out to lunch take them for a drive throw a football around, just be real with them.*

This female participant developed a very strong relationship with her social worker. This worker not only provides tangible support such as referrals to services, but also emotional support

by helping the youth stay connected to family (even in Southern California) even after aging out of foster care:

> *My social worker got my case when I was 16, me and her didn't really start to have a relationship until I was almost emancipated, but when we did get that relationship I can really tell that she was there for me. Cause she was always there for me, it's just I always pushed her out so I think for me was giving her a chance earlier and not just because I needed her because I was gonna emancipate, she had what I needed, she had the connections I needed, so I guess in a way you could say I used her. But I was always told to pimp the system; get your resources. Yeah even now I talk to her more now than I did when I was in the system, she is the one who is gonna take me to see my brother in L.A. so now we have a really good relationship and I have been emancipated for two years and you know she's still taking me and my family down to go see him.*

A few participants from the study reported that they were now working in social services and some were even working in past group homes where they lived. They had developed such strong relationships with the group home staff that they wanted to continue the relationship by securing work in the facility after aging out. This female participant discusses how she was able to continue the mentoring-type relationship she had with group home staff because she now sees them every day during the course of her workday. In fact, she refers to the staff as, "family":

> *I am still in contact with three staff from the group home I lived at and now I am a staff person at that group home – the same one I lived at. I see the majority of them on a daily basis. I talked to them outside the group home, on the phone. They are like family.*

Hard to Create Permanency When Relationship with the Social Worker is Not Strong

> *I didn't care about my last social worker because she didn't care about me. (female participant)*

There were many participants in this study who felt as though their social worker did not care about them or their growth and development. It seems like it would be very difficult for a social worker to know the relational permanency and emotional needs of foster care youth if the worker does not have a strong relationship with the youth. Additionally, one can imagine that social workers may be the first adults foster care youth may come in contact with besides their birth parents or care providers. If the social worker and youth do not have a strong relationship or positive rapport, it may be difficult for youth to feel as though they can develop a relationship with other adults in their lives:

> *The social worker is the first adult you come in contact with. And, by that being the first adult, if you feel like that adult wasn't cool, then that is how you will look at all adults. Then you'll be like, I don't want to be here because they don't care about me. They are just a staff and they are just coming for a check. That stays in your mind and you don't want to get know nobody because that social worker didn't want to get to know you. Then they might turn it into anger and they might want to run away because they think nobody likes them. The youth then thinks that the adult is just here for money and a check.*

Many youth in the study described not having a positive experience with their social workers. In fact, youth reported not seeing their social workers very often; many youth said they did not see their social workers for the federally-mandated *monthly* child welfare worker visits (see

Public Law 109-288, the Child and Family Services Improvement Act of 2006). Very simply, a female participant stated,

> *My social worker, I kinda didn't see her. Never really saw her a lot.*

Similarly, another male participant stated,

> *My social workers would always last like a month or so, like a visit or two and then I had this one social worker for hecka long, I would see her like once every 6 months so I only saw her twice too, ok three times.*

Many participants thought that their social workers were not doing their jobs by not making the required monthly visits, building rapport with the youth, or returning phone calls from the youth. It may be that these social workers may not have been able to make family and other permanent connections for youth while they were in foster care. One participant stated, "*I don't even think my social worker was at my emancipation conference."* And, another female participant stated,

> *Then the social workers say, "if you need anything give me a call." But then they don't answer their phone! But then I call again and their voicemail is full. So what kinda message is that? So call their supervisor and their voicemail is full. So what is the point?*

Another female participant concurred:

> *My social worker when I thought she was being cool, it was really that she wasn't doing her job. When I started to need her – I started to need services, rides, money – she was never around and wouldn't answer her phone.*

Participants also commented on the unresponsiveness of their social workers after they left them messages; many reported that their social workers did not return their phone calls. Perhaps the unresponsiveness of some social workers is related to foster care youth not being able to see their families and build permanent connections with other adults while in care. One male participant was able to articulate that most foster care youth want their placements to be as close to a family setting as possible:

> *There are the kids who say – my social worker didn't tell me this or that. And, when the staff call the social worker, the social worker doesn't call them back. Like the kids want day passes, home passes, sometimes they have to get an authorization from the social worker to see if that's okay. And, if the social worker doesn't get to them in time and the kids end up AWOLing and their program goes downhill. If their social worker is stable, the kids are stable. And, the kids need someone that is going to be there for them and actually care for them and show that they care for them. Then they are going to stay. The kids are mostly looking for a family setting. And we try to be as much as family as possible. It is hard work. I wish I was still in a group home with someone taking care of me.*

Lastly, this participant had a very clear perspective about how her relationship with her social worker may have negatively affected her transition out of the system and into adulthood:

> *Personally, I think that If I would have had a better relationship with my social worker I think I would be doing ten times better than I am doing today.*

If foster care youth are not able to develop a strong relationship with their social workers, and as a result not be connected to permanent emotional connections before leaving care, then the youth are potentially even more isolated after leaving care. This female participant reflected on this devastating consequence:

> *If [social workers] aren't there for foster youth to help them learn that there are steps in life, then what are they doing for them besides closing them off to the world?*

When asked about their relationship with their social worker many participants had negative feedback. Due to not seeing their social workers often, lot of youth felt like they did everything for themselves on their own, without assistance from their social worker:

> *I talked to my social worker, but, everything I was doing was on my own. My social worker wasn't seeing me regular like she was supposed to. She would probably see me like twice every six months. That was low, and I felt like I needed more action from my social worker like she needed to come and see or listen to what I needed to say. Everything I did was just on my own. I guess I learned a lot from my grandmother before she passed away.*

This female participant also did not have much communication with her social worker, even when she was placed in a foster home that was not appropriate.

> *The big issue that we had was that we had a social worker and met her once. We saw her once for 10 minutes and then the only other time we would see her was right before court. We didn't see her any other times. The only other communication we had was we would call her and she would never call us back. Especially when we were in the first home and we wanted to be placed with another family because we started not getting along with the family and we didn't want to live there anymore. They had a dirty house. We asked to be moved and she didn't get back to us. When we got home we didn't get any assistance, like with making sure my mother was doing what she was supposed to do. They just checked out the house and that was it.*

There were some participants who described having positive and strong relationships with their social workers. These young people felt as if their social workers had their best interests in mind when it came to placements and family connections:

> *My social worker knew that another placement would be good for me and it was. I even stayed there after I graduated. We came to a compromise. He always had my best interests at heart. My social worker knew what kind of person I was and searched for the best place for me. He always listened to me.*

Lack of Contact with Connections After Aging Out

Although youth might have connections with social workers or group home staff while they are in care, the goal of permanency interventions is for youth to have those permanent emotional connections after leaving care. Unfortunately, for many youth in our study, the connections they made with social workers and staff often ended after they aged out of care:

> *I had a counselor inside the GH that stayed in the home with us and supported us. We could talk to her about anything. They had classes like lifeskills so when we aged out, like, we would be able to know how to put in an application and how to do a resume. My probation officer hooked me up with that counselor. My social worker stayed in the house. I don't still have contact with the counselor. I haven't had contact in a few years.*

Another female participant talked fondly of a relationship she made with a female staff person at her group home in Northern California. After she left foster care she, like many former foster youth, had to move and lost most of her belongings. She wanted to contact the staff person, but could not remember the name of the group home. Unfortunately, she was not able to connect with the staff person because she thought she had no way to reach her:

> *The lady staff person at the group home, we used to call her grandmother. She was really good and like her a lot. She wanted to keep in contact with me after I left. After I got out I moved and lost all my contacts. Everything was lost. After I aged out I couldn't remember the name of the group home, but her name never faded away.*

Similarly, this male participant discussed the connection he made with a male group home staff member. Unfortunately, the youth also lost contact with the staff member after aging out of care:

> *One person that I did get good with was the staff at the group home. A man from Oakland. I see him but I don't have his number. Everytime I always want to talk to him. He was a cool staff.*

In contrast, there were two youth who mentioned still having contact with foster parents after leaving care. The hope is that these emotional connections will continue long after the youth leave foster care. This female participant describes that her foster parent is like family to her now:

> *One foster home, the foster parent I still [have contact with], her and her family, she was the only one that I've kept in contact with out of all the homes I've been in. We talk like once a month and sometime once a week. Like I really feel like she's part of my family, it's not like you're the foster parent and I'm the foster child, like we really are family.*

> *If you are going to be in the system, then families should stick together, because that is all you are going to have. That is who you are going to trust.*

This report illustrates that former foster care youth have very different experiences with developing permanent, emotional connections to adults while in foster care. Some youth reported very positive experiences with being placed with and connected to family, yet many others did not feel as though their social worker did all that they could to connect them with family or other adults before leaving care. However, a few young people described having close relationships with family, past social workers, past residential social work staff, and mentors, since they were able to develop these relationships while in care. Yet, it is important to note that some of these relationships did not continue after the youth left foster care. And, their experiences may have varied depending on the relationship between the social worker and the youth, the availability and willingness of family to take in or be connected to youth, type of placement, location of placement, and whether the social worker made the effort to explore family and other adults (e.g. mentors) as emotional connections for the youth.

Youth in this study described a strong feeling of loneliness while in foster care, sometimes a lack of emotional connection to others, and isolation from siblings. Most young people in the study said it was necessary for them to remain in close contact with their siblings while in care, especially when they were not able to be in the same placement as their siblings. Similar to the Samuels (2008) study, this study clearly illustrates that youth need emotional, supportive, and permanent connections to others as they leave the foster care system:

My social worker helped me maintain my adult relationships. My social worker was the person I could call day or night.

Yet, before this study there had been no research to date examining the *process* that youth go through to help them develop permanent connections with others before leaving care. Specifically, there have been no studies examining the process from a youth perspective. Social workers are ultimately responsible for helping foster care youth develop strong and permanent emotional connections with others while in care. For the most part, the majority of the youth in this study did not feel as though their social workers did enough to link them with family and other adults, and to prepare them for such relationships and/ or placements.

Social workers should focus on keeping siblings together in placements or in close proximity to each other, making sure youth are not placed too far away from extended family, ensuring youth get adult mentors, and making it a long-term goal for youth to develop permanent connections while in care. But, there are many barriers keeping social workers from helping youth develop permanent emotional connections and the following section describes these barriers.

Barriers to Seeking Permanent Connections for Older Youth

There are many barriers for social workers to seek permanent emotional connections for foster care youth. First, social workers may not be adequately trained in helping youth develop permanency planning from an emotional connection standpoint. Current federal legislation mandates that social workers work on finding youth permanent placements while in care, but does

not address permanent emotional connections. In fact, most social workers are not necessarily specifically trained in linking youth with permanent emotional connections.

And, although the research examining the outcomes of permanency planning for older youth in foster care is slowly growing, there is still an overall paucity of research. Therefore, it is unclear what permanency interventions work and which ones do not. There are very few empirically-based and best-practice-type outcome studies of the various permanency interventions in the child welfare system today. Most studies have been pilot studies of smaller programs. Thus, it is important to examine why child welfare agencies and social workers may not focus more of their efforts on helping youth develop permanent connections with adults while they are still in foster care. In addition, when best practice research in this area is conducted, social workers should be made aware of the outcomes of such studies.

Also, given the adolescent developmental stage of individuating, there are often assumptions made that young people may not want or need a permanent connection. Youth may say they do not want a relationship with family, other adults, or mentors, but it is imperative that social workers continue to bring up the possibility and not cease to do so. Given the results from this study it is apparent that older youth in foster care want and need such relationships, but may not be ready to admit it. Therefore, it should be something their social worker brings up periodically and most definitely at every emancipation conference, well before youth leave foster care at age 18.

Staff turnover is another barrier that may prevent youth from developing relational connections while in foster care. Child welfare is an area of social work that is notorious for high staff turnover. Drake and Yadama (1996) found that most research shows that turnover rates are

between 23 and 60% depending on the study. And, the USGAO (2004) is still concerned about low wages, high caseloads, and employment stress contributing to low rates of retention in the field of child protection. With high staff turnover comes a lack of trust of social workers among foster care youth. When youth get multiple social workers while in care it may be difficult for trust and rapport to be built, which are essential to helping youth build other emotional connections while in care. Also, it is necessary for child welfare agencies to constantly train new staff. So, when a program like the California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP) is contracted with a county to do a pilot program, they may only be training a small number of staff. Trainings on permanency should be mandated in policy for all social workers in all counties, just as mandated training is done for all workers on other legal aspects of child welfare.

High caseloads may also contribute to why social workers are not able to take the time and effort to help youth on their caseload develop permanent emotional connections to adults and family while in care. Many youth in this study described that their workers were focusing the "here and now" regarding their case goals, placements and education, but not on the long-term goal of permanent relationships. Many youth thought their workers did not have enough time to assist. In addition, many youth stated their workers did not have enough time to even return the youth's general telephone calls, let alone assist them with long-term relationships.

Another potential reason social workers do not focus on permanent emotional connections for youth is a lack of clinical training. For example, workers may not have the clinical skills to manage feelings of grief, loss, or rejection that may arise when youth are linked to family and other adults in their lives. There may be a rejection from family members or other adults and the social worker may not have the skills or the time to manage a relationship. Given the outcomes of

this study, the following section describes the practice, policy and research recommendations related to youth developing permanent emotional connections to adults while in foster care.

Actions Items for Child Welfare Agencies

Social Work Practice

1. Implement Family and Permanent Connection Finding (FPCF) services for all youth in foster care not placed with kin, especially those youth over the age of 13
    a. Continuously train new child welfare workers, supervisors and managers on the importance of promoting family placements and helping youth develop permanent emotional connections with adults in care for at least three years before the youth ages out
    b. Run a family finding report on every youth in foster care (Weinberg, 2009)
        i. Shift FPCF focus to front end of child welfare interventions (i.e. dependency proceedings and emergency response)
        ii. Conduct family finding even for undocumented youth in foster care
    c. Social workers should add permanent connections to family (especially siblings) when making decisions about placements (especially out-of-county placements)
    d. Examine the cost-effectiveness of the Family Finding model to examine if it should be implemented within the county system, or be contracted out to a private non-profit

i. If services are contracted out, it is important to identify who is ultimately responsible for the FPCF services (especially if the youth has the closest relationship with their child welfare social worker)

e. Make sure all foster care youth have a voice in their placements with family and connections to adults while in care (when developmentally appropriate)

f. Link youth with mentors in the community

i. Develop more linkages with private non-profit mentor programs

g. All FPCF services should offer pre- and post-planning interventions including support for relationship disruptions for at least one year after a connection is made

Charles and Nelson (2000, p. 18) believe that child welfare agencies should have practice goals related to permanent emotional connections for in older youth. For example, all foster care youth should be able:

- To love and be loved by a safe, committed and competent adult (with an expanded definition of family)
- To have a secure base to come back to for re-direction, re-fueling and a sounding board
- To achieve meaningful connections in their lives and community to sustain a safe and productive life
- To develop the ability to successfully handle life's transitions
- To develop and maintain connections to siblings
- To increase a sense of cultural and self-identity

- To develop traditions, values and mores
- To develop increased self-esteem and self-efficacy through continuous positive reinforcement from adults
- To be prepared for adulthood and all of its responsibilities

Social Work Policy

1. Add a “Permanent emotional connection” section to CWS/CMS for data tracking (perhaps in Special Project Tab area)
2. Mandate that siblings have the same social workers while in foster care
    a. Develop policy to state who is responsible for bringing siblings together for contact if they have different social workers

Social Work Research

1. Conduct a longitudinal study exploring the outcomes of the Family and Permanent Connection Finding model to examine:
    a. Kin placement rates and length of time kin placements last (i.e recidivism)
    b. Emotional connection relationship rates and whether relationships last
    c. Foster youth satisfaction survey to examine the process of specific intervention

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