



## Building Bridges Initiative (BBI)

### Permanency Tip Sheet

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## **BBI Permanency Tip Sheet**

### **BACKGROUND**

When children and adolescents (hereafter referred to most often as youth or young people) must be removed from their family of origin and there are no identified family members who are able to provide a safe home in which they can grow up, achieving permanency becomes an urgent imperative that must be at the forefront of all actions taken with and on behalf of these youth.

Permanency involves having enduring family relationships that are safe and lifelong; offer the legal rights and social status of full family membership; provide for physical, emotional, social, cognitive and spiritual well-being and reunification; and assure lifelong connections to birth and extended family, siblings, other significant adults, family history and traditions, race and ethnic heritage, culture, religion, and language (Casey Family Services, 2005). Residential programs can provide vital attachment-informed services to the youth who are struggling the most to live in family-based settings that directly address their needs related to forming and maintaining the relationships all people need to thrive throughout their lives (Stewart, 2017).

Research consistently provides evidence that children who grow up in family-based settings have better outcomes than those who do not (Annie E. Casey Foundation [AECF], 2015; Pecora & English, 2016). The Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 (Family First Act) has responded to this research base by significantly altering the federal child welfare funding landscape in an effort to better support family-based care over group care when placement in



foster care is necessary (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2019; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USHHS], 2018). The Family First Act also acknowledges that there are instances in which youth have treatment and support needs that necessitate placement in a qualified residential treatment program (QRTP) using a trauma-informed treatment model (USHHS, 2015; Child Trends, 2019). As part of its commitment to enhancing sustained positive outcomes post residential discharge for young people and their families and, in part, to support operationalizing the intent of the Family First Act, the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) has developed several papers, including this permanency tip sheet and a virtual Family Engagement Toolkit, addressing some of the most vital aspects of culturally sensitive family engagement for residential providers operating within this exciting new climate that ensures family engagement will be a priority ([www.buildingbridges4youth.org](http://www.buildingbridges4youth.org)).

This permanency tip sheet offers guidance on how residential providers can ensure that all youth they serve receive treatment and support that prioritizes permanency as the primary vehicle through which healthy development and healing from trauma occurs so they can go home or find home as quickly as possible. Recognizing the vital role that family plays in well-being across all outcome areas for young people, many residential providers have already begun to shift their policies, programs, and services to prioritize permanency, cultural and linguistic competence, and youth-guided and trauma-informed care, and make family a central aspect of the organization at all levels (USHHS, 2015). These providers have learned a great deal that may help others navigate the shift to a permanency focus as outlined in the following series of tips.



## PERMANENCY TIPS

- Start by believing permanency is possible. Help everyone understand what permanency is, then create a culture of believing in it, and insist on relentless pursuit of it for each young person served. Permanency is a parent or family relationship that is safe, stable, emotionally secure, and lasting. It often means living with that parent or family and can be further reinforced with a legal tie. Insist on relentless pursuit of permanency for every youth. Nurture a permanency mindset, train a permanency skill set, and supervise to permanency competencies. Provide staff tools, resources and support matched to expectations, evaluation, and accountability.
- Take stock: how is your program doing on permanency for the youth served? Do an organizational scan. Assess. What are your vision, mission, and goals? What does your data look like? Are these areas supporting your program toward successful culturally sensitive family permanency outcomes for youth? If not, take heart. Your program is not alone. Every program must start somewhere. Consider an organizational permanency assessment such as the one Plummer uses (URL: <https://plummeryouthpromise.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Are-We-Permanency-Focused-Self-Assessment-6.18.18-FINAL.pdf>) (Plummer Youth Promise, 2018).
- Protect family as a right, not a privilege. The most critical incident for a youth receiving residential services is for a day to go by without talking to or spending time with family.



What would it do to you to spend more than 24 hours feeling lonely, lost, isolated, or forgotten by those you love or miss the most? Time with family should not be a behavior reward or consequence. Pull out all the stops and pull on all the levers to make *time with family* and *discharge to family* the gold standards.

- Start with cost-neutral steps. Identify the permanency goal for each youth in your program. Is it a realistic goal? Is progress being made toward it? Calculate the number of days each youth has been waiting for permanency. How many days of their life have they spent in placement rather than at home or with family? Rate youth loneliness on a scale of 1–10. (Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition, 2013). How lonely is this youth now? How lonely will this youth be in three or six months if timely progress is not made toward permanency? Now get to work.
- Be honest with your state and county partners. Let them know that despite a state-of-the-art facility; stellar programming; five-star clinical services; promising, best, and/or evidence-based culturally competent practices; and extraordinarily devoted staff, youth are too often discharged from residential programs to outcomes other than a permanent family. Too many young people leave residential interventions without parents or family unconditionally committed to nurture, protect, and guide them to successful young adulthood. Admit that your program intends to do better. Affirm that you know your state and county partners want to do better too. Ask them to join you. Tell them you want to help them achieve the federal mandate for permanency, to genuinely make their job



easier. Set up a meeting with them to review the characteristics of the young people your program serves who live in non-family settings. Develop a tailored plan together that addresses the unique situations in your own community and the communities the youth may return to. Agree to communicate closely and partner with integrity.

- Talk to youth and families, and really listen. Ask youth about themselves. “Who’s most important in your life? Who do you love? Who do you want to be living with now? What do you want ‘family and future’ to look like?” Ask youth about their family. “Who are your people? Who loves you? What must change for you to be and stay with them? What are your biggest wishes and worries?” Ask parents, “What do you hope and dream for your child? What will it take to make it work?” Or “If not you, then who?” Ask youth and families, “Why should we focus on permanency? How? What works? What doesn’t?” Accept criticism with grace. Apologize for past mistakes - even if you were not the one to make them. Assure them you are a team now.
- Use youth and family engagement tools. Identifying and engaging family members and caring adults on a youth’s behalf gets easier when you concretize an abstract conversation by using a visual tool or framework. Implement the Youth Connections Scale (URL: <https://casw.umn.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/YCSTool.pdf>)(Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare, 2012) with each youth pre admission or in the first week after intake. It can be used solely as a clinical tool to deepen discussions about the youth’s own perspective on the most important adult relationships in their life or used with the



suggested rating scale. Remember, the quantity of adult connections does not determine a youth's permanency; it is the quality, capacity, and commitment of the adult

relationships. [Circles of Safety and Support](#) (URL:

[http://www.partneringforsafety.com/uploads/2/2/3/9/22399958/circles\\_of\\_safety\\_support\\_booklet.pdf](http://www.partneringforsafety.com/uploads/2/2/3/9/22399958/circles_of_safety_support_booklet.pdf)) (Parker, 2015) is a tool that brings life to the process of identifying a

youth's and/or a family's network to be drawn upon as a permanency support and

resource. [The Three Houses](#) (URL:

[http://www.partneringforsafety.com/uploads/2/2/3/9/22399958/three\\_houses\\_booklet\\_updated.pdf](http://www.partneringforsafety.com/uploads/2/2/3/9/22399958/three_houses_booklet_updated.pdf)) (Weld and Parker, 2008) tool is of unmatched value in discovering a youth's

family-related *wishes* to provide motivation and direction, his or her *worries* to bring

realism and safety to the forefront, and the *good things* to be preserved when planning for permanency. Pick one to use with a youth and see where it takes you.

- [Figure out your theory of change](#). Stated simply, your theory of change spells out your best guess that if you do “this,” then “that” is more likely to happen. Something like, “If we prioritize permanency while enhancing preparedness skills and community connections, youth are more likely to leave our program better positioned to succeed.” A theory of change is rooted in best practices and demonstrated results. Developing a theory of change must be an inclusive, culturally sensitive, organization-wide process. Everyone must have input, so everyone has buy-in. The process is tedious and frustrating. And doing it right the first time is worth its weight in gold.



- Develop a permanency intervention and outcome model. If you do not know where you are going, you will not know if you have arrived. Your permanency intervention model flows from your theory of change; it is the roadmap to planning and executing daily staff activities. When it comes to permanency, your intervention model must prioritize best practices like family search and engagement, youth-guided/family-driven teaming, cultural and linguistic competence, and youth and family permanency readiness. Outcome measures must be strategically linked to interventions, so you know if they are moving you toward the intended permanency changes, if your efforts are making the difference you want to make. Some programs use Family Search and Engage; others use Family Finding or Extreme Recruitment®. Learn about different permanency intervention models [here](https://www.casey.org/family-search-engagement/) (URL: <https://www.casey.org/family-search-engagement/>).
- Make sure clinical goals advance permanency. Facilitating permanency *is* treatment for youth receiving a residential intervention. Getting youth back home to family safely and securely or figuring out where home will be and who will provide safe, secure, and lifelong parenting *is* the strategic work of residential intervention. If treatment goals do not specifically address, target, and support permanency, how transferable will successes be? Consider goals like “Increase William’s time with dad to weekend overnights/school vacations for the next two months”; “facilitate Skype sessions with Ebony and her godmother to work on a family genogram and share favorite memories”; or “help





Rasheed and his aunt name two caring adults to support them during overnights at home.”

- Encourage a “What will it take?” approach. Become a culture of *yes*. Do not accept “It didn’t work last time” or “It couldn’t happen.” Instead, ask, “What will it take for it to work this time, to make it happen?” It can be anything, big or small: delivering groceries when a youth spends a weekend with family or buying a futon so he has a bed, calling an Uber for a parent to a school meeting, finding a “lunch lady” who a youth remembers from elementary school, helping a dad who’s incarcerated give his daughter permission to love and live with a new family, and the list goes on. Brainstorm possibilities with everyone. Prioritize. There is always a next step to take.
- Get your board on board. This will take clear vision, strategic direction, calculated risks, and maybe even courageous conversations with stakeholders who question the new vision or staff who need to move on because they do not share it. It may mean realigning budgets; for example, holding off on a new basketball court to offer specialized culturally relevant permanency training, consultation, or coaching. It might mean seeking donors to fund expenses for travel out-of-state. It will mean doing things differently. With purpose and resolve. For a long time. For a mission of unparalleled importance: family for everyone.
- Start with one or two youth. Have no doubt; this one is hard. It seems unfair and goes against every fiber in our being to offer something valuable to a few if it means the others



## Building Bridges INITIATIVE

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do not get it. However, consider the alternative. If resources and bandwidth prevent an organization-wide permanency implementation, the alternative is doing nothing at all.

How fair is it to withhold or delay something so valuable, proven, and essential to youth well-being and long-term outcomes? Be realistic. Build incrementally. Start now.

- Count the number of days each youth has been in the child welfare system. Each day a youth has been in a child welfare placement is one day they have missed growing up in family and community. Each day is one that the youth has loaned us from their childhood. Count the days in placement that each youth has been loaned you, and to the entire child welfare system. Childhood is finite, so make every single day count.
- Reflect on the language you use. Notice the difference between these phrases: *This youth is on a pass to see family.* *This youth is on a family visit.* *This youth is spending time with family.* A simple change in how we phrase things opens the door to think about family differently and leads to permanency possibilities. Drop terms (such as *pass* and *visit*) that are not permanency focused.
- Reflect on this question: “Should the child-welfare system raise children?” Of course not. Our system for child protection and foster care was never intended to provide long-term parenting. No system or organization can adequately replace the role of parents and family in a child’s life. But sadly, every day a youth is in placement, that is exactly what is happening. Every day that a parent does not have full care of and decision-making



responsibility for their child, but an agency does, is a day for that child without permanency. Carefully consider the implications of this. And plan your course of action.

- Ask, “What is the plan for this youth to leave the child welfare system to family?” Ask this question of the assigned child welfare worker and supervisor upon referral of a youth to your program. Ask this question of all professionals involved and all agency staff who are directly assigned to work with this youth, as well as the youth, parents, and family members. Use this question as a “call to order” for each meeting on behalf of the youth. Make the answer to this question your top pursuit and priority for residential intervention.
- Watch permanency videos at each staff meeting. Inspire, inform, and motivate your team! There is nothing better than successful youth permanency stories to do this. Here are a few that stand out:
  - *Every Kid Needs A Family.* Features reflections on family from young adults who have left the system. Accompanied by a discussion guide. (Annie E. Casey Foundation [AECF], 2019)
  - *Kalani’s Story.* Chronicles successful family finding efforts for an 18-year-old young man. (EPIC 'Ohana, 2015)
  - *Reunification and Lifelong Families.* Highlights reuniting an 18-year-old young woman with her mother. (AECF, 2012)
- Make permanency a financial priority, big or small. Start small with family pizza outings or Uber rides, or start big with a permanency campaign; just start somewhere. This may



involve sacrificing other financial priorities that are important, of course, but maybe not the most necessary at this time. It all depends on your mission and how you re-order priorities to achieve it. Remember, childhood cannot wait.

- Begin weekly residential meetings reviewing permanency goals and progress. Regardless of whatever other topics need to be discussed and addressed at weekly residential staff meetings, there is no more important anchor to advancing permanency progress that rooting staff members in the permanency goal and progress for each youth. All other clinical, behavioral, academic and enrichment interventions and activities stand in service to achieving safe permanency and well-being for youth receiving a residential intervention. This will not be possible or fully realized without knowing where your team is starting and where you want to arrive in terms of permanent family relationships and family living for each youth.
- Increase time spent with family in every way possible. There is no way to strengthen or develop a relationship without spending time. Time together both builds a foundation and increases growth in youth and family relationships, and it assists in signaling when and how to set boundaries and limits within that relationship. Take stock of how your program either facilitates or impedes this. Are youth phone calls to parents, relatives, and other caring adults in their lives limited to a specific time of day or length of time? Do you overstaff on Fridays and weekends to make sure that required staff to youth ratios can be honored and that transport for youth spending time with their families can also be



prioritized? Do weekend and overnight staff members have fail-safe means to access the most updated list of people on each youth's call list? Is there a budget to make it possible for youth to spend time with family (mileage, airfare, overnights, activities, meals, etc.)? Do you make this budget category a priority with funders and donors? Are you willing to forego paying for something at the program that you feel is *necessary* for something about permanency, which we know is *essential*?

- Examine research on outcomes for youth aging out and ask, "Is this what we want"? Ask yourself and your team, "Do we want youth to leave us to higher or lower levels of care or couch surfing with peers or homelessness rather than family? If we do not rally all residential resources to prevent these high-risk outcomes by pursuing family permanency, what are we implying? That a quality residential living experience and environment and relationships with paid professionals is our highest aspiration?" These things are good; they are very good, in fact. But make no mistake: they should never be the goal. However, they become the goal when we do nothing different than what we have always done.
- View residential as an intervention, not a placement. For far too long, the professional language of residential intervention has promoted a concept of *care* rather than *intervention*. Conceptualizing and messaging our task as providing care over facilitating intervention sets the stage for confusion about roles and priorities. Providing *care* makes it easier to accept such things as staff replacing parents and family in a youth's life;



longer lengths of stay; and the belief that what’s happening now with youth in the program is more important than how, when, and to whom they leave the program.

Messaging residential work as *intervention* primes the pump for training staff to develop relationships with youth that exist primarily to bridge them to parent and family relationships, identifying and authentically engaging family early on and as the central key to discharge, and being propelled by urgency in youth’s timely return to home and community.

- Develop competency-based job descriptions and performance reviews for staff engaging youth and families. It is commonly believed that we must “find the right staff” if we want to implement permanency practice with residential interventions. But how about, rather, a quest to hire staff who culturally and ethnically reflect the youth and families served, who speak their languages and have the most synergistic values and easily transferable skills? Then train and supervise these diverse staff in the necessary philosophy and competency while building an infrastructure that supports and holds them accountable? Implementation science research over the previous decade or more has clearly shown that organizational change cannot be expected without each of these components. And clearly delineating the specific “how-tos” of youth permanency takes some effort, but it is not rocket science. Here are a few to get you started:
  - Develop proficiency in talking with youth about their hopes, dreams, wishes, and worries regarding family relationships.



- Establish working relationships with youth, family, and other caring adults to effectively advance timely progress to permanency and discharge to family.
- Facilitate all contacts with youth and family members (such as transports, on-site and off-site activities, clinical hours, spending time with family on the phone, social media, in-person, etc.) to maximize permanency-related intervention.
- Find potential permanency resources in the community. For youth who do not have known or viable family, providers must leverage opportunities for youth to spend time in the community and develop natural relationships. Utilizing permanency best practices increases the likelihood that mentors, coaches, teachers, and other natural community relationships will grow to offer relational and legal permanency for youth.
- Simply refuse to give up. There is always a next step, another brainstorm, a leap in trying something new or another attempt at something that did not work in the past but might now.

Shifting the focus of residential interventions to providing time-limited, culturally and linguistically competent, and permanency-focused interventions that empower youth by including them in treatment planning and prioritize family relationships and natural connections will offer youth the greatest chance of positive long-term outcomes post-residential discharge.



## **SUMMARY OF SOME IMPORTANT RESEARCH SPECIFIC TO PERMANENCY**

Starting from the belief that “kids don’t grow up in programs” allows residential providers to shift from viewing family as the *origin* of the child’s problem to viewing family as the *solution* (L. Frey, personal communication, 2018). Children do best when they grow up in families; they experience fewer behavioral issues, more stable placements, and better permanency outcomes (VanDenBerg, 2008; Helton, 2011; Koh & Testa, 2011; Cheung et al., 2011). Studies suggest that family engagement and involvement is essential for youth receiving residential treatment (Frensch & Cameron, 2002; Hair, 2005; Walter & Petr, 2008). One benefit of family involvement is that youth receiving residential treatment are more likely to have positive social and behavioral outcomes (Hair, 2005). As youth who have experienced out-of-home care grow up, the presence of social supports is a key factor contributing to success (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Greeson et al, 2015; Arnett, 2000; Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

While residential providers often develop strong relationships with youth receiving residential interventions, even supportive connections with paid professionals tend to end quickly once emancipation occurs (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). In a qualitative study of 43 young adults (ages 21 through 26) with foster care histories, only 9% identified their social workers as supports (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). Another mixed-methods study with 97 participants found that youth reported their closest family relationships were with grandparents, siblings, and stepfathers- with siblings being the most common response (Jones, 2013).





Youth who have strong unpaid natural support networks that include friends and family experience positive outcomes including improved health, increased resilience, and an increased sense of self-identity (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Lenz-Rashid, 2009). Strong relationships buffer the effects that adverse childhood events and traumatic experiences have on young people’s mental and physical health (Lazar, 2019). Young people who develop lifelong connections during their foster care experience are ten times more likely to achieve their goals (Lockwood et al., 2015). In a study seeking to identify what contributed to successful outcomes for youth with experience in foster care, 84% of youth interviewed responded to the question, “Who or what helped you...” by noting a specific individual person (Hass & Graydon, 2009). In another, similar study, a young woman attributed her successful transition after foster care to “a bunch of people that were too stubborn to give up on me” (Walter & Petr, 2008). In a study that examined the mentoring experiences of youth of color in foster care, findings suggested that natural mentors were more effective than paid supports, and what mattered most to youth was a sense of having a parent-child–like relationship (Greeson & Bowen, 2008). Research also suggests that parent support offsets the harmful impact of loneliness for adolescents and mitigates the risk of poor health and depression (Goosby, Bellatorre, Walsemann & Cheadle). Youth expressed that a loving and caring relationship facilitated trust (Greeson & Bowen, 2008). Echoing the importance of a loving and caring relationship, youth in foster care clearly prioritize relational permanency over legal permanency; providers must engage youth in exploring who is important to them (Perez, 2014).

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