

# *Families For Teens*

## KEY QUESTIONS FOR SOCIAL WORKERS



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## THE PROMISE

To all children who comes into care, society makes a promise to restore them to stronger, healthier, more stable families than the ones from which they were removed. We do this by either returning children to their families of origin strengthened by the intervention of child welfare, or by helping them bond to new families. Children and youth experience this as an urgent need.

When this promise is not promptly fulfilled, young people sometimes despair of ever realizing this promise. Their disappointment and anger never exempts the professionals who work with them from fulfilling the promise, no matter how difficult that may seem.

The suggested list of casework practices described below is aimed at securing family connections for young people. It is not an exhaustive list, but should be considered as a point of departure in working with youth who need our assistance in finding a permanent connection to nurturing, committed adults.

**SELF TEST** (Developed by Virginia Sturgeon, formerly adoptive family support specialist with the Kentucky Special Needs Adoption Program)

1. Do I like teens?
2. Do I believe in their ability to (re)connect with a family?
3. Do I believe that they need to be in a family?
4. Do I feel safe, emotionally and physically, around teens?
5. Can I form a caring yet professional relationship with *this* young person?
6. Can I speak honestly, directly and clearly with teens and involve them in all the decision I need to make on their behalf?
7. Can I make a mutual agreement with this young person?

8. Can I have a relationship characterized by Honesty, Dependability, Predictability, Consistency and Follow Through?
9. Can I work through or with a third party with whom the young person already has such a relationship?

Reflect on your answers and how they might affect your ability to work with young people. If the answer to any of these questions is an unequivocal “No”, work closely with your supervisor on any case involving a teen, or ask to be reassigned.

## FINDING CONNECTIONS

1. Have you identified all the resources in the case record? Have you identified anyone who has done anything that could be construed as a parenting act, such as
  - shown up at a meeting
  - called about the youth
  - visited the youth
  - inquired about the youth in any way at any time even once.
2. Have you looked at the case record from beginning to end, including the records that do not belong at your agency (for example, the Field Office records, records at other foster care agencies where the child was previously placed)?
3. No potential permanency resources should be ruled out at this stage, regardless of whether they have been previously deemed “inappropriate”. The search process should be inclusive and exhaustive. Don’t stop with the first resource or two.
4. Have you asked the caretakers (foster parents, group home staff, child care staff) around this youth, “Who does the youth have connections to?”

- who does the young person get calls from?
- who does the young person ask to call?
- who visits the youth?
- who does the youth go to?
- where does the young person go when AWOL?
- If the answer is “friends”, are they interested in having friends’ parents involved? Have they been involved?

5. Have you talked to the youth about the people in their past whom they remember and with whom they want to be in touch? Have you asked the young person about the people presently in their lives with whom they have connections? Who do they want in their lives when they are adults?
6. Sometimes youth rule out people they want to be with for fear of the circumstances under which they were removed from the home (particularly if they were “thrown out of” a prior foster home). If truth were told, they would like to go back there, but are afraid to identify that home. Ask:
  - “Where did/do you feel most comfortable?”
  - “With whom did/do you feel most comfortable?”
  - “Can you tell me about a time when you felt most comfortable?”
  - “Can you tell me about the places you were where you felt most at home?”
  - “Can you tell me about the people with whom you feel most comfortable?”
  - “Can you tell me whom you trust?”
  - If they say, “No one”, ask: “Can you tell me with whom you would like to build a trusting relationship?”
  - Who do you want to be connected to in the future, next year, in 5 years or more?
  - When something great happens to you, who do you feel like calling?

- When something bad happens is there an adult that seems to understand better than other people and won't mess around in your head?
- What would it be like to try to build a family for yourself from your network of caring adults?
- Is there anyone who makes you feel useful?
- Can you think of someone who knows you're not stupid and treats/has treated you that way?
- Who really listens to you and follows through for you?
- Ask questions about connections in the future and look for hints of hopefulness despite the risks.
- Who cared for you when your parents couldn't?
- What adult do you know whose advice you respect (even if you don't feel you can take it right now)?
- Who do you want to help you plan for your future?

## CONTACT

1. How have you contacted these people (those identified by the youth and by your review of the case record) to see if they are willing to help plan for the child's future? Have you asked these people if they know anyone who had a special relationship with the child in their experience? Ask questions such as:
  - "Can you see yourselves as part of this youth's life?"
  - "What part are you willing to play in this young person's future?"
  - "What are you/others willing or able to do to support a primary relationship with the young person?"
2. Have you encouraged everyone to identify what strong bonds they have with the young person?

## PREPARING THE YOUTH TO CONSIDER ADOPTION

1. What have you done to prepare a youth to consider adoption?
  - Has the youth met with other youths who have been successfully adopted and are still in touch with members of their birth family?
  - Have you asked the youth, "Where do you want to belong?" as opposed to "Do you want to be adopted?"
  - Does the youth understand that she or he can be adopted and still be loyal to their birth family?
  - Does the youth understand open adoption and how it would apply in his or her case?
  - Has the youth met young adults who were adopted as adolescents?
  - Has the youth had an opportunity to meet prospective adoptive parents who are interesting in adopting an adolescent?

## PREPARING THE BIRTH PARENTS TO CONSIDER ADOPTION

Although permanency work with birth parents begins before a child comes into care, before adolescence and before the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of care, blaming the past doesn't get the job done. Permanence is an ongoing part of a child's developmental needs. We need to disarm the word 'adoption' if we want to work effectively with birth parents.

Our job is to convey that urgent need for safety and stability to birth parents and to help them understand that (1) holding children in unstable circumstances such as foster care is harmful to children's healthy emotional development; and (2) adoption no

longer means that children (especially adolescents) must be cut off from all contact with members of their birth family.

Here are some issues you might raise with a teen's parent where reunification is not a viable option:

- Talk with the birth parent(s) about how important safe stability is for the healthy emotional development children of all ages, including teens.
- Use the universal experience of the terrible events of September 11, 2001 to illustrate how difficult it is for all of us, and particularly youth in foster care, not to know what the next day will bring or what is going to happen to them next. Help parents understand that many youth in foster care experience on a daily basis the kind of fear and uncertainty about the future that the rest of us experienced on and after September 11.
- Tell parents that some people think that children's fears about their future are even more overwhelming because of how little they know about alternatives.
- Ask them to help you work on providing the optimum emotional support, safety and legal security for their children.
- Ask parents if they know what has happened to other children who have come into care. Acknowledge that with their help in identifying and working with a safe and secure family setting, their child will be much better taken care of than children who have no one permanently able to nurture their future and their potential.
- Ask parents, "If something should happen to you, who would you hope could care for your children?"
- If a parent is unable to care for a teen because of mental illness or disability, ask, "Who, beside you, do you want

to plan for your child's future in order to give your child what he/she needs to develop into a healthy adult?"

- Talk about shared parenting as a general concept. Acknowledge the fact that adoption does not necessarily change their emotional relationship with their children.
- Remember that this will mostly likely take more than one conversation.
- Ask parents to identify how families have shared the responsibility of child-rearing in the past.
- Ask them if they can think of how they did this successfully in the past with their own brothers, sisters, friends.
- Ask them if they remember adults (other than their parents) who cared for them when they were children. If their parents chose those "helpers", how did that feel?
- Use and demystify the word "adoption". Are you still inadvertently conveying to parents that adoption is a dirty word?
- Let them know that adoption has changed – especially for teens, adoption is no longer the "replacement model" that it was 40 years ago for infants. Continuing some form of contact with the birth family is often the norm now in many adoptions, including private infant adoptions. Tell them we've learned just how important maintaining family ties can be. We also know just how important it is for a child to feel claimed.
- Talk about openness in adoption so that it doesn't sound like a plea bargain.
- Explain that we now have ways to reflect that openness in an adoption agreement.
- We know that secrets whether in a family or across families have negative effects on children and so we want to build openness into families.

- Offer to introduce them to adoptive parents and birth parents who have facilitated post-adoption contacts between birth parents and their children.
- Give parents a chance to talk with adoptive and other birth parents privately.
- Take the discussion out of the realm of “good parent/bad parent” that is driven by legal necessities, and talk instead about gifts and strengths.
- Involve parents in a discussion about extending their parenting, not ending it.

## PLANNING FOR PERMANENT FUTURE FAMILY CONNECTIONS

1. Is the planning youth-driven?
  - Has the youth identified the people and topics for the planning meeting in advance?
  - Has the youth identified their goals for the future? What do they want to achieve? Where do they want to be in 5 years? Don't rush to discourage their vision.
  - Does the young person understand the critical importance of education, and its connection to permanency?
2. Have you held 3-5 planning meetings with those whom the youth identified (i.e., all the resources with whom they want to have a personal connection into the future)?
  - What have you done to help the teen to prepare for these meetings?
  - What came out of these meetings? Was a primary relationship identified?
  - Have you talked to the contacts about the importance of a permanent family connection, explaining that everyone needs to have someone in their life as family?

## BUILDING AND MENDING RELATIONSHIPS

1. Have you prepared the permanency resource(s) for the consequences of getting involved in the youth's life?
  - Have you helped them understand what issues there may be?
  - Have you helped them understand the youth's issues about belonging?
  - Have you facilitated visits with the youth?
  - Have you provided the kinds of supports (through counseling and peer support groups) that will be there for this relationship afterwards?
  - Did you phase it all in?
2. Did you help the permanency resource to identify a network of support?
3. Have you connected them with other primary caretakers?

## AND KEEP IN MIND . . . . .

In all meetings and contact, maintain a level of genuine respect for the youth and his or her choices regardless of disagreement (disagree without being disagreeable).

Third party reviewers, supervisors and case managers should consistently ask about what kind of permanency casework practice has occurred for the young person.

Remember the 4 domains of success:

- competence (work on deciding to whom one belongs for oneself and finding permanent family connections)

- usefulness (belonging implies reciprocal responsibilities)
- belonging (most securely, legally and socially)
- power (finding, identifying, deciding and acting on belonging to a family)