

Talking With Older Youth About Adoption



Introduction

Exploring permanency options for older youth in foster care requires a focus on two key components: (1) recruiting and preparing adoptive families who can meet the needs of older youth and (2) engaging and supporting older youth in conversations about their future and their openness to adoption.

This tip sheet provides child welfare professionals with a framework for how to talk with older youth about permanency and offers tangible tips and suggestions on ways to make these conversations more effective and meaningful.

Remember to ENGAGE

E Explain what permanency means—in general and what it can mean for youth

N Not a one-time conversation, but an ongoing discussion

G Give youth opportunities to explain their feelings about adoption

A Ask youth who they feel connected to

G Give youth choices so they can practice self-determination

E Explain their options and help them understand the pros and cons

Key Considerations

Begin preparing for permanency early (not just in the final few months before a youth will age out of foster care) through ongoing discussions about their future and by helping them cultivate supportive relationships.

Use words that youth will understand, not child welfare jargon that might be confusing.

Explain the meaning of permanency and adoption. For example, permanency is a family relationship and bond that is intended to last a lifetime. Adoption makes the family permanence legal.

Assess and be aware of your own thoughts and attitudes—including possible biases or resistance—about adoption for older youth. If you have doubts about the possibility of finding families for older youth, you may reflect that doubt in your work.

Keep in mind that the word “adoption” may carry negative or confusing connotations for youth, especially if they think it means replacing their biological family or other important relationships. Understanding each youth’s perspectives and experiences is key to helping them talk through their own concerns and questions.

Support youth in understanding their different options as you talk about adoption; help them build skills of self-determination and using their voice.

Consider engaging a youth’s independent living worker as a messenger and partner for helping youth explore the possibility of adoption and the importance of permanency.

Involve youth in their own recruitment, such as being part of writing their profile for photolistings, arranging for a professional-quality photo or video to accompany their profile, identifying characteristics of potential parents for them, and sharing their ideas about recruitment messages.

Involve older youth – whether they have been adopted or not – in mentoring their peers in foster care. Read stories and watch videos together highlighting foster care alumni and discuss the stories with the youth. See stories and videos on the [AdoptUSKids website](#).

Consider whether everyone involved with the youth has done everything they can to support the youth’s permanency options through reunification or guardianship with relatives. As you discuss adoption, the youth may have questions about whether there were other options for having a permanent family.



Suggestions for Starting a Conversation

Helping youth think about adoption and the importance of having lifelong supportive relationships requires ongoing conversations and a willingness to listen closely and carefully to what youth are telling you—directly and indirectly—about their goals, concerns, questions, and dreams. Conversations with youth should be authentic—not scripted—and responsive to how each youth wants to engage. There are many effective ways to prompt these discussions and help youth explore the idea of adoption. The questions below may be used as a starting place or as topics to incorporate into your conversations with older youth.

Possible Questions

- What do you want for your future? What dreams do you have for yourself?
- What does permanency mean to you? What have you heard or do you believe about adoption? Do you have concerns or questions about either?
- Do you know anyone who has been adopted? If so, what do you think about their experience? What questions does their experience raise for you?
- What benefits do you think there would be to having more adults who love and care about you as you become an adult and throughout your life?
- Are there ways I can help you find out more about adoption and what permanency could look like for you? Are there people you'd like to talk with about adoption?
- Who in your life – past or present – do you see as a support to you? Who do you call to ask for advice? Who believes in you and loves you? Who would you call at 2:00 AM if you were in trouble?



Possible Topics to Discuss

- Adoption doesn't mean giving up, replacing, or rejecting any of the other important people in your life, including your birth family.
- Even as you're becoming more independent, having an adoptive family can guide and support you in following your dreams and help you to be the best version of yourself.
- Adoption doesn't mean changing your identity or who you are, or even your name if you don't want to. What it does mean is adding to the number of people who care about you and support you throughout your life.
- Homelessness and unemployment are very real risks for youth who age out of foster care. Having an adoptive family can be a safety net as you transition to adulthood – you can go to school and you will have a place to go home to when you need it.
- Let's talk through your options and write out the pros and cons of each. Help us identify caring, committed adults in your life who can be there for you no matter what.