

ALLIANCE for CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

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Transition Age Youth Resource:
Building Permanent Family Connections for Youth Exiting Foster Care

Having a permanent family is about more than a legal decision or where you live. It means having caring adults in your life who will support you, guide you, and be there for you as you grow into adulthood and beyond.

Every young person in California's child welfare system should have a plan to help them build lasting family connections whenever possible.

Importance of Permanent Family Connections

Young adults who have permanent, supportive relationships are more likely to:

- Finish high school and college,
- Find stable employment,
- Have safe housing,
- Experience better physical and mental health,
- Have someone to call during emergencies, and
- Build lifelong family relationships.

No one should have to navigate transitioning to adulthood alone.

Permanency Options in California

If you are in foster care and have an open dependency case, there are several legal permanency options:

- Returning home to your parent(s) or legal guardian (reunification)
- Kinship Guardianship,
- Adoption, and
- Tribal Customary Adoption (for eligible Native American youth).

Reunification

Reunification is returning safely to your parent(s) or legal guardian after the issues that brought you into foster care have been resolved.

If reunification is an option, you may ask your social worker or probation officer what supports and services are available to you and your family following reunification:

- What supports will continue after reunification?
- Who do I call during emergencies?
- How will my education be affected?
- What happens after my juvenile court case ends?

Kinship Guardianship Assistance Payment (Kin-GAP) Program

In California, qualifying for a kinship guardianship generally requires the guardian to be a relative (or a non-related extended family member) who can provide you with a safe, stable home.

If kinship guardianship is an option, you may ask your social worker or probation officer what supports and services are available to you and your family:

- What supports will continue after reunification?
- Who do I call during emergencies?
- How will my education be affected?
- What happens after my juvenile court case closes?

Adoption

Adoption is a permanent legal relationship where another adult becomes your legal parent. If adoption is an option, you may ask your social worker or probation officer what supports and services are available to you and your family:

- How can I maintain my sibling relationships?
- How can I maintain contact with my biological family?
- How will I maintain my cultural traditions?
- What will change after adoption?

Tribal Customary Adoption

Available for eligible Native American youth, tribal customary adoption provides permanency while honoring tribal customs and may not require termination of parental rights.

If tribal customary adoption is an option, you may ask your social worker or probation officer what supports and services are available to you and your family following reunification:

- How can I maintain my sibling relationships?
- How can I maintain contact with my biological family?
- How will I maintain my cultural traditions?
- What will change after adoption?

Raising Your Voice in Permanency Planning

Beginning at age 14, California law gives youth a role in planning their future.

You have the right to:

- Participate in case planning meetings,
- Share your opinions with the judge,
- Attend court hearings when appropriate,
- Help create your transition plan,
- Identify supportive adults you trust, and
- Ask questions about your permanency options.

Your opinions matter, although the court ultimately makes legal decisions based on your best interests.

Many youth have mixed feelings about guardianship and adoption. That's okay.

- Your feelings matter.
- You can ask questions about all available permanency options.
- You should understand all your options before making decisions.
- You should never feel pressured about choosing a permanency option.

Talk openly with your attorney, social worker, CASA, and other trusted adults about any questions you have and your concerns.

Building Lifelong Support

A legal permanency plan is only one part of having lifelong support. Think about the people who will be there for you through life's challenges and successes. These relationships are often called "relational permanency" and can include:

- Relatives,
- Former caregivers,
- Teachers,
- Coaches,

- CASA volunteers,
- Mentors,
- Tribal community members,
- Faith leaders, and
- Family friends.

A permanency plan should help expand your support network, not limit it.

Staying Connected with Your Biological Family

Depending on your situation:

- You may be able to stay in contact with your biological family members after guardianship or adoption.
- Contact can include visits, phone calls or video calls, texts, emails, or letters.
- Continued contact is not available in every case.

Talk with your attorney about what may be possible and share your preferences.

Your Important Personal Documents

Before exiting care, you should receive copies of important documents whenever available, including your:

- Birth certificate,
- Social Security card,
- California ID or driver's license,
- Health records,
- Immunization records,
- Educational records,
- Court documents, and
- Information about health insurance.

Keep these documents in a safe place.

Turning 18 Without Legal Permanency

Turning 18 does not automatically end your support. You may choose to participate in Extended Foster Care, allowing you to retain supports and services from foster care until age 21 (see the Alliance Transition Age Youth Toolkit Extended Foster Care Basic Info and Housing Options for more information).

Extended Foster Care provides:

- Housing,
- Case management,
- Financial assistance, and
- Continued support.

Extended Foster Care allows eligible young adults to remain in foster care until age 21. To participate, you must meet one or more of the participation requirements:

- Attending school,
- Working,
- Participating in job training,
- Looking for work, or
- Having a medical condition that prevents participation

You remain involved in planning your own goals.

You can leave Extended Foster Care and re-enter as many times as you like before turning 21 if you remain eligible. Talk with your social worker and attorney if you are considering participating in Extended Foster Care or leaving Extended Foster Care.

How to Ask for Help If You Need Assistance Discussing Permanency Options or Building Your Family Connections

Considering permanency options can be overwhelming. If you need help:

- Talk to your social worker, probation officer, or attorney,
- Ask supportive adults such as mentors, CASA, teachers, coaches, or school counselors,
- Reach out to trusted family members, and
- Ask questions about your options.
- Some questions include:
- What is my current permanency plan?
- What permanency options are available to me?
- Who are the lifelong supports in my life?
- How can I maintain my connection with or reconnect with my siblings?
- How can I maintain my connection with or reconnect with my relatives?
- What benefits continue after I leave foster care?
- When will we update my transition plan?
- What important documents do I still need before I exit foster care?
- Who can I call for support after I leave foster care?

- Am I eligible for Extended Foster Care or Independent Living Plan (ILP) supports?
- What happens if I stay in Extended Foster Care?
- What housing options and supports are available in Extended Foster Care?

If you need support, you can contact the Family Urgent Response System (FURS), a free and confidential service available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for current and former foster youth (up to age 21) and their caregivers. Call or Text 833-939-3877 (833-939-FURS). You can speak with a trained counselor or peer supporter who can help you work through problems, answer questions, or connect you to resources. If more help is needed, FURS can send a local mobile response team to meet with you in person and help resolve conflicts, provide support, and connect you with services. Support is voluntary, confidential, and available for any concern, big or small.