

Families for Teens: A Toolkit for Focusing, Educating and Motivating Staff

**Written by Robert G. Lewis, MSW,
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To every child who is removed from his or her family of origin, society makes a promise – to provide a better family than the one from whom we have separated them. For children who have spent years in the child welfare system, that promise is either forgotten or thought to be unattainable. But many young people hold on to the hope of having a family of their own despite the sometimes overwhelming number of previous negative experiences.

There are dozens of beliefs and arguments for not doing the critically important work of providing permanence for older children in care. Our goal should be nothing less than making permanence for teens an essential component in all our agency's programs for youth. No child should "age out" of our agencies without a family!

The first step in meeting this goal is commitment of the agency's top administrators. The second step is training. Robert G. Lewis, Maureen Heffernan and their collaborators have written three Toolkits as resources for training both child welfare workers and youth in care. *Adolescents and Families for Life: A Toolkit for Supervisors* has been used by hundreds of agencies to educate staff on the issues, concepts and strategies of permanence for youth. It is a step-by-step training program. The *Family Bound Program: A Toolkit for preparing Teens for Permanent Family Connections* presents a program of nine workshop sessions and five weekends with "practice" families to prepare teens to enter or reunite with a permanent family.

This volume, *Families for Teens: A Toolkit for Focusing, Educating and Motivating Staff*, is a curriculum for staff training on achieving permanence for older children in care. To begin discussion of each of 41 topics, Lewis and Heffernan adapt an issue of Lewis' popular newsletter for child welfare professionals, *What Do You Think?* The discussion sections present concepts and interpretations that often challenge the way social work professionals think about adolescent permanence. They promote staff examining their own mind-sets and emotions concerning the particular issue under discussion. The authors believe that to change social work practice and to do challenging work for the children in our care, we must "own" the new goals and strategies. And in teen permanence work, there are numerous myths to dispel!

The second page for each topic is a case study of actual teens in the child welfare system – their experiences, their words, their changes. These case studies do not always have positive outcomes. They illustrate both the successes and the failures of the way we provide services to the teens in our care. The authors then pose questions for more in depth consideration of the case study. The authors' goal is to move child welfare workers from understanding to "doing." Thus, in the case studies and questions, they emphasize practical action steps to achieve permanence. Each section concludes by asking participants to list their next action steps.

Who Can Benefit?

Families for Teens was originally conceived as a program for on-going support of staff already engaged in this work, but authors believe it can also be used to introduce social work staff to this challenging work since the book addresses most of the major concepts and problem areas. Through group discussion of concepts and cases in hour-long weekly meetings, the building blocks of an effective youth permanence program will emerge.

About the Authors

Robert G. Lewis, MSW, is a consultant, trainer and author who has provided training and technical assistance in hundreds of agencies in the U.S. and Canada with training and technical assistance in permanence. He focuses on policy and organizational development in support of permanence and development of social work practice. He is active as a keynote speaker and workshop presenter. His website, www.rglewis.com includes many free resources to support permanence that can be downloaded at no cost. These resources include: *Seeing the Voices of Children and Youth/Setting the Record Straight* – a low cost video project with teens; *Ask Teens* – a set of direct permanency questions; *The Conversation Generator* – more permanence focused questions adapted from the Search Institute's youth engagement questions, *Engaging Youth and Those Around Them in the Process of Permanence* – a free training curriculum; and the *Missing Children Protocol*.

Maureen S. Heffernan, MSW, is an author, consultant and trainer who specializes in adoption and permanence issues. She has worked in Ohio public and private child welfare settings and is a member of the Family Builders Network and co-chair of the Ohio Adoption Planning Group.

To purchase Families for Teens -- The cost of **Families for Teens** is \$59.95 each. To order online, go to www.thetoolkit.org. For discounts for multiple copies, contact Robert G. Lewis at bob@rglewis.com. Purchase orders are accepted. Send to bob@rglewis.com.

Families for Teens

Unit 1: Believing that Teens Really Need and Can Have Families -- nine topics addressing our resistance to adoption and family reconnection for adolescents., why teens need families, the necessity of “believing” adoption for teens is possible, the difference between placement and permanence, and the hidden messages we give to teens in concepts such as “after care” and “independent living.”

Unit 2: Understanding the Process of Making Permanence Happen for Teens -- eight topics dealing with the meaning of the Adoption and Safe Families Act, what it takes to make permanence what we do, the steps in the adoption process and how they can be derailed, and how to deal with siblings in our efforts to secure permanent families for the teens in our care.

Unit 3: Working Through Teens Feelings -- six topics about adolescents' feelings about foster care and losses, their anger and shame, and the need to identify and use their strengths.

Unit 4: Exploring Shared Parenting -- six topics dealing with birth and foster parents as resources, shared parenting, and rethinking the practice of concurrent planning in the context of a search for permanent family connections

Unit 5: Talking With Teens About Permanence – six topics providing guidance on how to bring up permanence to teens, why they often say “no” and what to do about it, and preparing teens for family (re)connections.

Unit 6: Finding Families for Teens – six topics presenting concepts and strategies to help find families for teens including what kind of families work for adolescents, child specific recruitment, kin adoption, and staff adoption.