

Adolescents and Families for Life: A Review

Adolescents and Families for life: A Toolkit for Supervisors. Robert Lewis and Maureen Heffernan.

By Mary Ford, North American Council on Adoptable Children.
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Members of the general public and even some child welfare professionals, assume that teens are unadoptable and foster youth would rather not live in families. In *Adolescents and Families for Life: A Toolkit for Supervisors*, authors Robert Lewis and Maureen Heffernan deconstruct the notion that adolescence is a compelling reason to suspend permanency planning, and build a strong case for prioritizing lasting adult connections with youth. The guidebook — grounded in adolescent child development as well as development within the context of abuse, neglect, separation and loss — also teaches workers how to consider and discuss permanency options with teens, and then support links between youth and adult caretakers.

Adolescents and Families for Life is comprised of 27 mini-workshops that supervisors can conduct during staff or unit meetings. Each workshop comes with a CD of PowerPoint slides that can be used via computer projection or converted into overhead transparencies. Mini-workshops include short lectures, discussion, guided imagery, hand-outs and case examples.

The accompanying guidebook is divided into three sections. Themes address the importance of permanency; the impact

of the system and barriers to permanence; how to help teens prepare for permanence; finding and making connections with adults; and parenting strategies.

“The objection to permanency planning for adolescents stated by child welfare professionals on every level,” Lewis and Heffernan write, “is rooted in the fear of re-traumatizing vulnerable young adults who have been through enough.” The first section, entitled “Making the Case for Permanency,” accords teen permanence (described as care by kin, guardianship, or adoption) the same importance as routine health check-ups or school attendance -- childhood activities we view as required, not optional.

The cost of impermanence is too high, the authors assert, citing a recent large-scale study of emancipated former foster youth that found fewer than half were employed, many were victims of crime or assault, and 40 percent wished they had been adopted. Social workers are invited to ponder whether long-term foster care connections with a mentoring family, or return to a previously discounted birth family may be considered permanence.

Section two (“Choosing, Using and Developing Tools with Teens”) advises

workers to engage teens in permanency discussions by asking how they feel about having a family (versus whether they want to be adopted). The section tackles tough issues such as teen resistance, family group conferencing and birth parent mediation, openness, youth grieving, and helping youth get their emotions under control. In addition, the authors describe in detail how workers can use a child's case record as a road map for unearthing adult connections from the past.

When seeking parents for teens, the authors caution, workers must look for adults who possess unique qualities -- among them, a heightened awareness of youth development, an understanding of the youth's past trauma and past relationships, and an acceptance of the child's approach-avoidance dance as bonds develop between the parent and child. Key factors in predicting a successful placement include the family's level of commitment to a life-long relationship, the youth's sense of belonging in the family, and the legal and social status offered by the relationship.

Post-placement parenting strategies are featured in section three, where Lewis and Heffernan observe, "the real challenge for [adults who are parenting older adopted or foster children] is how to keep their own issues from becoming confused with the youngster's." One exercise, "What's the Worst" encourages parents to plan their reactions to negative behaviors. The exercise includes a list of behaviors that the youth may have witnessed and/or in which he may be likely to engage (doing drugs in front of younger kids; engaging in prostitution; stealing food from grocery stores;

dropping out of school; etc.). Parents rank the most pernicious behavior as "one" and the least offensive act as "ten." The exercise helps parents to anticipate which behaviors will trigger their strongest responses, and consciously decide how they will cope.

Section three also describes the advantages of forging permanent connections with kin, and highlights adoption issues such as the fragile attachments some teens will form with their new parents. "A critical element in the stability of adolescent adoptions is the parents' ability to make a commitment even in the face of an attachment that is less than that for which they might have hoped," say the authors.

Lewis and Heffernan wisely call for independent living skills preparation and alternative permanency planning to occur simultaneously rather than separately. But to call such work "concurrent planning," as the authors and others do, is confusing. "Dual-track youth planning" may be a better descriptor for helping youth get ready for both family and independent living.

Lewis and Heffernan's philosophy of permanency planning for teens is nicely summed up in the statement, "Teen permanence is a relationship, not a place." These days, as permanence for older foster children assumes a bigger role in child welfare practice as directed by recent federal law, *Adolescent and Families for Life* will doubtless serve as an excellent resource for agencies, social work supervisors, and their staff.