

Youth Involvement in Case Plans, Court Hearings, and Administrative Reviews

It is important that youth be involved in developing their case plans. Youth can participate by reviewing and providing input to their court reports and by attending court hearings and/or administrative reviews.

These events offer youth a chance to voice their feelings, ideas, needs, and wants regarding their care. By being proactive in their case plan development, youth are empowered to gain a measure of control, direction, and interest in their lives.

This involvement is a shared responsibility between the youth, caretaker, youth's attorney, and social worker. All participants should encourage youth to be involved in their case plan.

“When I was in the system I felt like no one listened to what I wanted or what I needed. I deserved to have a say. I mean, it was my life and everyone else was making decisions for me. No one ever told me about court hearings or reports. I feel like it put me at a real disadvantage when I started having to make my own decisions when I emancipated because I had never made major decisions on my own before.”

– A Former Sacramento County Foster Youth

Below is a list of the benefits to the youth for getting involved in the case plan:

- Youth will know what's going on first hand and won't have to wait for information from someone else
- Youth have the opportunity to voice their opinions and have recommendations based on those opinions
- Youth get to have input on key decisions being made with about them and the their life direction
- Youth will be able to read and understand their court report
- Youth will be able to hear information being presented about them and share their views
- Youth won't have to blame anyone for making decisions without them, because they will be involved
- Youth will learn what role everyone in their life plays in helping make decisions about them: Social workers, attorneys, probation officers, foster parents, and biological parents, among others
- Youth will be able to practice decision-making skills before they turn 18 (which will help them get ready for emancipation)



Reconsidering Reunification

Permanency options for youth must include reassessing whether it is possible for youth to safely return to his or her parents' care. Each youth's situation must be reviewed to determine the best plan for permanency.

- 10** While some youth in out-of-home care lose contact with their families, others remain actively connected to their families of origin. Some teens run away from their foster homes and return to their parents' homes without court approval.

Some youth are not open to forming connections with other adults because of the bond they may have with their parent(s).

In some cases, problems that resulted in parents' young children being removed may have been resolved.

If a child was removed from their mother's/ father's care, being placed back with them may not have been fully considered. Both parents as well as maternal and paternal relatives should be reconsidered for all children in out-of-home care if other permanency options are not in place.

Additionally, the circumstances of extended family members who may have been originally ruled out for potential placement may have changed.

All options need to be explored!

“Please, try harder to connect us to our families sooner. Offer incentives to families and more supportive services to get their kids back sooner. Also, once we get back in the home make sure that things continue to stay OK so that we don't have to go back into foster care.”

**– A Sacramento County
Foster Youth**

Considering Adoption

Adoption offers children and youth the highest legal level of permanence. The Adoptions and Safe Families Act of 1997 requires that adoption be explored for any child remaining in long-term foster care, regardless of age. Adoption is not the only option for permanence, however, and all permanency options must be explored.

Historically, only very young children were considered for adoption. As society has become aware of the urgent needs facing children and youth growing up in foster care with few or no permanent connections, these attitudes have changed.

Myths about adoptions of older children must be dispelled. Case in point: That adoption is not a choice for them.

There is no such thing as a child or youth that is “unadoptable!”

Nobody is ever too old to need a committed, supportive and loving family!

All children and youth are adoptable, regardless of age, ethnicity, sibling group size, disability, sexual orientation, or special needs. Whether adoption is the best permanent plan or not depends on what the child or youth desires, the legal circumstances of their case, and other factors.

Families and youth can redefine adoption together, as well as define what it means to them to be a family.

Some Important Facts About Adoption

- Kinship adoption is viable for family and non-related extended family members
- Adoption is an option for older youth and young adults, not just a plan for babies and young children

“I was actually adopted by my foster parents. In the beginning I never thought it could happen but it did. They gave me freedom from my burdens and I will always love them.”

—A Former Sacramento County Foster Youth

- Adoption does not have to mean losing contact with birth family
- Open adoption is an alternative if all parties agree
- Termination of parental rights does not necessarily mean relationships must end, too
- Adoption by a relative does not necessarily mean changing familial relationships. For example, a grandmother who adopts her grandchild becomes the legal parent, but can choose to remain in name and in fact the child’s grandmother
- Mediation services are available to develop a Post-Adoption Agreement between adoptive and birth families for ongoing contact and visitation
- The original birth certificate can but does not have to be amended after adoption
- Names do not have to be changed due to adoption
- Financial support and post-adoption services are available after adoption of a court-dependent child



When Considering a Plan of Adoption With Teens, We Commonly Find That:

- Some youth say they do not want to be adopted. We often accept these sentiments without exploring underlying concerns, doubts, or fears about what adoption means to them. This exploration needs to be encouraged. “NO” may just be a first response
- Common myths about teenagers and adoption must be examined. Youth and their prospective adoptive family can define what adoption means for them.
- Some youth think, “Why bother? I am going to turn 18 in ___ years anyway”
- Many youth doubt anyone would want to adopt a teenager
- Some youth feel that agreeing to adoption means betraying their birth parents
- Some youth think that adoption means that they will lose their connection or future connection to their birth parents and/or siblings
- Some youth have never considered the value of what a permanent, lifelong family can offer them
- Some youth have experienced multiple placement failures, leaving them mistrustful and fearing rejection

12

Questions to Consider When Thinking About Adopting a Youth

- Has adoption been explored fully with the youth's wishes and needs being considered?
- Is the youth open to a plan of adoption?
- What is my own motivation in adopting this youth?

Top 15 Reasons to Adopt a Teenager

1. **No diapers to change.**
2. **They sleep through the night.**
3. **They will move out sooner...but can still visit.**
4. **You don't just get a child, you get a friend.**
5. **They will keep you up to date on the latest fashion.**
6. **No more carpoos—they can drive you places.**
7. **No bottles, formula, or burp rags required.**
8. **They can help around the house.**
9. **They can learn from you.**
10. **They can teach you how to operate your computer.**
11. **They will show you how to work your cell phones.**
12. **They will keep you up to date on the lingo/slang.**
13. **They are easy to talk to.**
14. **You can be their role model.**
15. **They will keep you young and full of life.**

*Oklahoma Youth Advisory Board-2000/
Sacramento County Former Foster
Youth 2006*

- Do I understand the legal and financial aspects of adoption?
- Am I willing to make an unconditional, lifelong parenting commitment to an older child or youth?

Considering Legal Guardianship

Relatives and non-relatives may become legal guardians. Guardianship involves a legal commitment and court order that takes the youth out of the status of being a foster child. In most cases, the youth's Juvenile Court dependency is dismissed. While this commitment does not provide as high a level of legal permanency as adoption, legal guardianship is a viable option for families and youth to consider.

About Legal Guardianship:

- When legal guardianship is ordered, court dependency is usually dismissed
- Birth parent(s) can stay involved giving the child, in a sense, two sets of parents. This can be a benefit for some families depending on the relationship with the birth parent(s)
- Birth parent(s) maintain the right to have reasonable visitation
- Birth parent(s) have the right to petition the court to regain custody if their circumstances change
- The guardian has the right to petition the court to have the guardianship overturned or the guardian may go back to court and request the child/youth be returned to the birth parent(s)
- Relative legal guardians in California may be eligible for financial assistance. This funding is based on the basic foster care rate found on the table on pg. XX. Detailed information can be found at www.dss.cahwnet.gov/getinfo/pdf/pub272.pdf
- Non-relative legal guardians may be eligible for foster care funding and a special rate may be considered, depending on the needs of the youth

Questions to Consider When Thinking About Committing to a Youth By Becoming a Legal Guardian

- Has permanency been explored with the youth and have the youth's wishes and needs been considered?
- With legal guardianship, will the youth feel that he or she is a second-class family member?
- Will the youth fear being kicked out if he or she misbehaves?
- Are you making a permanent commitment to raise and be a lifelong family to the youth?
- Are you concerned about what happens if parental rights are terminated?
- Have you explored your reservations about adopting the child or youth?
- Is this a permanent or a conditional commitment?
- Have the various options been explored with the youth?
- Does the youth hope to ultimately be reunified with his or her birth parents?
- Does the caregiver expect the youth to be reunified with his or her birth parents, making guardianship a temporary commitment?
- Is guardianship a permanent commitment to the youth even though reunification may be possible?
- Although guardianship legally ends at age 18, is the guardian still willing to make a lifelong commitment to the youth?



Understanding Long-Term Foster Care

Foster care is meant to be temporary, although in rare cases, it may be at any given time the best plan for specific youth with specific needs. Generally, it is not considered the best option for permanency.

Why Long-Term Foster Care is Discouraged as a Permanency Option

- Without a caregiver's legal commitment to raise a youth, some youth move from foster home to foster home. Moves can occur at important developmental stages when the youth needs a committed, caring adult to “hang in there” with them.
- Being labeled a “foster child” may carry a stigma. Some foster youth feel like they are not “real” members of the family
- Remaining in foster care may interfere in the family's and the youth's daily life in such ways as regular social worker visits and court oversight.
- The court, rather than the youth's caregiver, maintains decision-making authority
- The foster youth or family may feel isolated from their community

Misconceptions About Why Foster Care May Be the Best Option

- Myth:** The caregiver or youth may need ongoing support and services from either the court or child welfare agency.
- Fact:** Other permanency options (adoption, guardianship) also offer ongoing services and support.
- Myth:** The placement may need ongoing supervision until it is fully stabilized.

Fact: Ongoing supportive services and supervision are available before, during and after a youth's placement is stabilized.

Myth: Ongoing intervention may be needed due to family history with issues such as substance abuse, history of domestic violence, and/or tension between the birth family and the caregiver.

Fact: Permanency in a youth's life often supersedes past events and allows him or her to flourish emotionally, mentally, and physically at unprecedented rates.

Myth: Caregivers may have concerns about their ability to raise the youth on their own.

Fact: Support services are available through the caregiver's social network and the community so that he or she doesn't feel like they are raising a youth alone.

Myth: Financial support from Sacramento County may be reduced or lost if legal guardianship is established, depending on financial status of the caregiver or what state they reside in.

Fact: In many cases, financial considerations can be resolved to prevent this barrier to permanency from occurring.

14



Your Gateway to the Future:

The Sacramento County Independent Living Program

The **Independent Living Program (ILP)** is a federally funded, county-administered program to assist eligible foster youth ages 16-21 in developing the skills and getting the services they need to be successful when they transition to independence.

Youth in foster care that receive state or federal foster care funds are eligible for ILP services. If you don't know if you qualify or you have questions, call (916) 874-9308.

Youth can be referred to ILP by social workers, probation officers, school district foster youth services social workers, foster parents, foster family agency social workers, and county ILP coordinators. You may also refer yourself by calling (916) 874-9308.

Each referred youth is assigned to an ILP social worker for case management. The social workers meet with ILP youth to complete an assessment and develop an ILP service plan.

What other agencies are involved?

The Sacramento County ILP contracts with the following school district's Foster Youth Services offices to help foster youth with classes and case management services:

- Elk Grove Unified School District
- Sacramento City School District
- San Juan Unified School District
- Grant Union High School District

Educational opportunities

- Sacramento County ILP collaborates with the American River College Independent Living Program to provide services for current and

former foster youth.

- ILP also provides the establishment of several scholarship funds for foster youth.

What is available to ILP participants?

Classes

- Personal Growth
- Independent Living Skills
- Emancipation Support Group
- Choices: For Young Women Only

Activities

- Conferences
- Holiday Dinner
- Graduation Dinner/Awards Ceremony
- Speakers Bureau Community Service Activities

Workshops

- Financial Aid for College
- Exit Workshop
- Independent City

Services

- Education and career planning
- Link to community resources
- Help completing financial aid forms, college applications

California Youth Connection

The California Youth Connection is a support and advocacy group for foster youth and former foster youth, ages 14-24. Youth involved in the California Youth Connection participate in public speaking, community service, leadership training and fundraising activities.

Getting Ready for Emancipation

Are you ready to **venture out on your own**? Have you made plans and **decisions regarding your housing, employment and health**? Many resources and services are available to help you make the big step. Below is a list of **services to help you transition**:

Independent Living Program

You are eligible for services up to age 21. Even if you did not participate in ILP while in foster care, you can still be assigned an ILP worker. If you are unsure of who your ILP worker is or have other questions, please call 874-9308.

Medi-Cal or Health Coverage

You are entitled to Medi-Cal (medical coverage) up to the age of 21 years if you exit foster care at age 18. You get it at zero-share-cost, which means you don't have to pay anything for it.

You will automatically receive Medi-Cal insurance, but it is important that you give any address changes to 875-0772. If you emancipated before age 18 or returned to your parents' care, you are still eligible for Medi-Cal based upon your income. You may apply at the closest welfare office. Each county has its own method of determining ongoing eligibility for Medi-Cal.

You will be required to transfer to an adult medical physician upon your emancipation.

For medical or health questions call 875-0772.

Mental Health or Disability Coverage

You are also eligible for mental health services until age 21 for counseling or medication maintenance. If you are eligible for Social Security benefits, make sure they are activated six months before you emancipate. Contact your county worker, probation officer, or ILP worker for information.

Education

- Foster Youth Services can assist you with tutorial services, locating school records, and developing graduation plans if you lack the right credits.
- Several types of financial aid and scholarships for college are available to foster youth. The "ILP Chafee Grant" provides up to \$5000 for those youth who are ILP eligible and enroll in a college, university, or accredited vocational school.
- You qualify for a "fee waiver" and do not have to pay tuition at any California community colleges. Contact your ILP worker for assistance.
- "Linkage to Education" assists foster youth in getting admitted to college and with books. Contact Daren Maeda at 443-5942.

Employment

All foster youth are required to register at a Sacramento One Stop Career Center. You may visit the following centers

with the Casey Great Start Young Adult Program for your employment needs:

- Hillsdale Career Center, 263-4144
- Franklin Career Center, 262-3219
- Mark Sanders/EDD One Stop, 227-9327 and
- The Charles A. Jones Skills Center 433-2620.

Other employment resources are available through EDD's Youth Employment Opportunity Program at 227-0301.

Lesbian, Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer and Questioning (LGBTQQ)

LGBTQQ youth have rights, resources and services available throughout the community. Contact the Lambda Center at (916) 442-0185 or your ILP worker for assistance.

Legal Assistance

If you need legal advice after you emancipate, call the Sacramento Child Advocates "Advocates for Young Adults Program" at 364-2381. The program can also help find you a dentist or healthcare provider.

Housing

Transitional housing is limited in Sacramento County. Contact the Adolfo Housing Program at 874-1370. Both Job Corps and Conservation Corps also provide housing while you learn a trade. Contact your ILP worker for housing assistance if you plan to move into your own apartment.

Documents and Important Information

Make sure that you have your original birth certificate and original Social Security Card, parent's death certificate if applicable, immunization records, and a California Identification Card or Driver's License. Contact your ILP worker for help getting these documents.

Mentoring

Contact the ILP Program Planner at 874-9715 if you would like a mentor to assist you during your transition to adulthood. Many people in the community want to help you succeed.

Household Goods or Furniture

Contact your ILP worker if you need household goods. For furniture, contact Welcome Home at 263-0570.

If this all seems overwhelming, don't worry! Many people care about your well-being and want to make sure you have support while you emancipate. If you need help, call your worker at 874-9308.