



## Measuring youth connections: A component of relational permanence for foster youth

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents the development and preliminary validation of the Youth Connections Scale, a measure of youth connectedness as a component of relational permanence for youth in out-of-home placement. The instrument measures different domains of youth's connectedness, including the number and strength of connections to caring adults and the types of support perceived by youth. Results of a pilot validation study of the instrument, with a sample of 53 adolescents in out-of-home care, indicate good concurrent validity and high test–retest reliability. Child welfare and youth-serving agencies can use this instrument in their efforts to strengthen and measure the connectedness and relational permanence of youth.

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### 1. Introduction

Youth need the support of caring adults. Youth who are placed in out-of-home care often come into placement with connections to adults who are important in their lives; yet, many of these connections are lost while youth are in care. Many experts and scholars now advocate for child welfare agencies to increase their focus on building permanent, supportive connections for youth while in out-of-home care (Charles & Nelson, 2000; Samuels, 2009). Legal permanence, defined as the reunification, adoption, or transfer of legal guardianship of the youth, remains a critical goal to achieve for youth in child welfare systems. However, not all youth who exit foster care achieve legal permanence. In recent years relational permanence has been introduced as a concept that is equally important. Relational permanence is defined as youth experiencing a sense of belonging through enduring, life-long connections to parents, extended family or other caring adults, including at least one adult who will provide a permanent, parent-like connection for that youth (Brown, Léveillé, & Gough, 2006). For many youth, legal and relational permanence are achieved through the same efforts, by reunifying youth with their parents or when youth are adopted by family members or other caring adults. As child welfare agencies work towards the goal of permanence, best practices ensure they also build and strengthen connections to supportive adults for youth in out-of-home care.

Research findings indicate that the benefits for youth of being connected to supportive adults include positive long-term effects on youths' social, psychological, and financial outcomes, including improved self-esteem, educational achievement, and social skill development (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Massinga & Pecora, 2004; Perry, 2006). Connecting foster youth to supportive adults and creating a financial and emotional safety net is particularly critical during late adolescence as youth begin to transition to adulthood.

Child welfare professionals are also paying increased attention to older youth who have long-term foster care or independent living as a permanency goal. In 2010, 11% of the 254,114 children and youth who exited foster care in the United States were emancipated or “aged out” of care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012). Recent studies highlight that youth who age out of care without legal permanency experience increased risk of homelessness, early pregnancy, incarceration, victimization, and poverty (Barth, 1990; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Hook & Courtney, 2011). Youth who aged out of care were more likely to have dropped out of high school, experienced unemployment, had histories of job instability and, on average, were paid less than their non-foster youth counterparts (Cook, 1994; Courtney et al., 2001; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Mallon, 1998). Many youth experienced instability in housing with as many as 25% of youth reporting being homeless for at least one night (Courtney et al., 2001).

Foster youth without supportive connections also experienced risks related to their socio-emotional well-being with increased incidence of mental health and behavioral problems, including depression (Barth, 1990). Alternatively, other studies indicate that youth who reported higher levels of social support from friends and family had improved health and developmental outcomes and increased

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resilience (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). Several studies that have looked at these important caring connections, also called “natural mentors,” found that youth with at least one caring adult were more likely to have better well-being outcomes, including better physical health, less stress, improved mental health, improved educational and economic attainment, and higher life satisfaction as an adult (Ahrens et al., 2011; Greeson, Usher, & Grinstein-Weiss, 2009; Munson & McMillen, 2009).

Youth also noted increased sense of self-identity when able to maintain relationships with family and other adults important in their lives (Lenz-Rashid, 2009). Unfortunately, feedback from many former foster youth indicates they felt they had little say in maintaining the most important relationships in their lives (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). In several studies, youth reported an overall lack of emotional support when leaving care, reporting feelings of isolation and disconnection (Ahrens et al., 2011; Geenen & Powers, 2007). Lenz-Rashid (2009) surveyed former foster youth who felt that their child welfare workers did not do enough to strengthen their relational permanence by failing to connect them to adults who might be stable, enduring supports for them after exiting care.

Evidence suggests that many youth seek out relationships with their biological family after leaving foster care (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). In a qualitative study by Samuels (2009), many youth reported unmet relational needs upon reconnecting with biological family after exiting care, highlighting the complex and dynamic nature of the relationships of foster youth with kin and non-kin networks. Child welfare organizations are beginning to recognize and utilize the opportunity to work with youth while in out-of-home care, to help youth address issues of grief and loss, and to help youth build positive connections with their families and other supportive adults (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006).

Along with changes in practice and emerging research, policy shifts also promote the efforts of engaging supportive adults, extended families, and communities in caring for youth at risk of out-of-home placement, such as the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Geen, 2009). Earlier policies, as early as the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, provided an important framework and foundation for child welfare that underscored the importance of familial and community connections for youth and promoted well-being by mandating active efforts of child welfare professionals to maintain the cultural, familial and spiritual ties that are critically important to youths' identity development.

Young people, in general, need the safety net of financial, social and emotional support from caring adults or parent-like figures, and this support often continues well into young adulthood, through age 25. This safety net is not always available to young people leaving foster care. Although child welfare and youth serving organizations are paying increased attention to relational permanence, no valid and reliable instruments exist to measure this construct. The *Youth Connections Scale* (YCS) was developed to begin to fill this gap, and to help child welfare agencies and organizations better work with youth in strengthening the safety net of supportive adults and measure the level of relational permanence for youth in out-of-home placement care. This article outlines the development and pilot testing of the validity and reliability of the YCS.

## 2. Relational permanence

Recent scholarly and professional dialogue in child welfare expands the meaning of permanence, by reconsidering the multidimensionality of legal, physical and relational permanence (Freundlich, Avery, Munson, & Gerstenzang, 2006). Legal permanence in child welfare is achieved through (1) reunification of a child or youth with their biological parents or legal guardians; (2) adoption; or (3) transfer of legal guardianship. Physical permanence reflects the stable and continuous placement of the youth with the same caregiver. However, many youth report that the relational aspects of permanence are the most important to them (Samuels, 2009; Sanchez, 2004). It

is often within the most important relationships with parents and family that youth find relational permanence. In addition to defining relational permanence as youth having lifelong connections to caring adults, including at least one parent-like connection, relational permanence can also be understood as youth experiencing a sense of belonging and a deeper understanding of who they are and how they fit into the world (Brown et al., 2006; Samuels, 2009). Three aspects of relational permanence are outlined in this section, including the (1) social connectedness of youth; (2) establishing a safety net for youth; and (3) youth experiencing a sense of belonging.

### 2.1. Social connectedness of youth

Success in establishing and maintaining social relations is important for healthy development, as social relations are among a person's most fundamental sources of positive functioning and well-being (Perry, 2006). Youth development literature outside of foster care contexts has long identified the benefits for youth of being connected to supportive adults (Massinga & Pecora, 2004; Perry, 2006). Some studies indicate that multiple sources of support from multiple networks are linked to improved outcomes for foster youth (Perry, 2006); while other research indicates support from even one to three adults can increase successful outcomes for youth including educational, social and financial achievement (Search Institute, 2006; Ahrens et al., 2011).

Research on social support for youth aging out of care has revealed that many youth report feeling isolated and disconnected from supports that were once a part of their daily lives in care (Lenz-Rashid, 2009; Samuels, 2009; Sanchez, 2004). Some studies found that youth have little, if any, direct family support or other community networks to ease their transition into adulthood (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006; Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003). In addition to feeling isolated, some youth reported feeling unprepared for establishing new connections and supports (Barth, 1990; Courtney et al., 2001). The unique experience of being in foster care may also pose challenges to youths' understanding of interpersonal relationships, including distrust (Bamba & Haight, 2006; Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Interpersonal relationships provide means for reciprocal support, establishment of social norms and obligations, and sharing of information and resources. The value of the social networks and the benefits that flow from these networks is an asset that is also referred to as social capital (Coleman, 1988). The lack of interpersonal relationships, and thus lack of social capital, sets youth at a disadvantage for achieving later positive outcomes and sustained well-being (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Sanchez, 2004). Social capital can act as a protective factor for youth transitioning to adulthood, when youth find emotional and concrete types of support in stable relationships with caring adults (Avery & Freundlich, 2009). Studies have indicated that former foster youth who had some continuity of relationships with significant others, including siblings, foster parents, and biological parents, had better adult developmental outcomes than those who lacked these supports (Kerman, Wildfire, & Barth, 2002).

### 2.2. Establishing a safety net for youth

For many young people in the general population, financial, social and emotional support from their parents continues well into young adulthood. Transition to adulthood is often a long process during which young people may leave and return home again on three or more occasions (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006). This transitional period, termed emerging adulthood, is described by Arnett (2000) as a unique period in which young people age 18 to 25 are working towards independence by addressing specific developmental tasks such as increased logical reasoning, increased sense of responsibility and interdependence with others, and establishing healthy adult relationships. Throughout this extended process of emerging adulthood, ideally, there is continued availability of the family home as a “safety

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