



# Profiles of relational permanence at 22: Variability in parental supports and outcomes among young adults with foster care histories



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## ABSTRACT

Alumni of foster care are at considerable risk for transitioning to adulthood without supportive parental relationships due to significant disruptions of these relationships and histories of maltreatment. This study investigated key dimensions of parental support (care, dependability and financial support) in relationships with birth parents and parental figures among young adults who received foster care and exited to diverse permanency outcomes. Using Latent Class Analysis, four groups were identified indicating young adults who had (a) connections to both birth parents and parental figures; (b) minimal connections; (c) some connection to parental figure; and (d) some connection to birth parent. Young adults who reported connections with both birth parents and parental figures reported better outcomes, while those who reported minimal connections had least optimal outcomes. An examination of antecedent characteristics indicated a modest role of legal permanence. Results here highlight a need for inclusive child welfare practices that honor the family fluidity that foster youth experience and privilege relationship quality over legal permanence, particularly for older youth in foster care. Greater methodological rigor in the assessment and study of relational permanence and its potential to offset risks among maltreated youth in foster care is called for.

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## 1. Introduction

Early adulthood is a critical time in development as youth encounter challenges requiring greater autonomy and independence, yet still need emotional and financial support from parents. Relationships with parents involving warmth, dependability and support have inherent value and have been demonstrated to confer benefits to offspring across the lifespan. Alumni of foster care have typically encountered disturbance and disruption in parental relationships at critical points in development, raising important questions regarding their access to, and quality of, parental supports during early adulthood. Child welfare practice and policy has long recognized the value of “permanence” in parental figures, however, researchers have started examining “relational permanence” as a meaningful way to understand important but often overlooked qualities of relationships between foster youth and their parental figures (Samuels, 2008; Semanchin Jones & LaLiberte, 2013). This study uses relational permanence as a conceptual

frame to examine the diversity of relationships alumni of foster care may have with parental figures in multiple dimensions, and the potential importance of these relationships in providing support during young adulthood.

### 1.1. Parental support in early adulthood

Among youth without histories of foster care, the critical importance of parental support during adolescence and young adulthood has been demonstrated in multiple domains. As adolescents and young adults face the developmental task of relinquishing dependency on parents, establishing autonomy and forming unique identities (Arnett, 2001), relationships with parents may seem to diminish in salience. However, the continued need and desire to depend on parents (or a parent figure) facilitates healthy adjustment in early adulthood (Aquilino, 2006; Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Hill & Holmbeck, 1986; Ryan & Lynch, 1989). Qualities of parenting relationships including availability, warmth, support and involvement, typically of long duration, impact multiple domains of young adult functioning ranging from overall well-being and self-esteem to interpersonal competence in establishing quality relationships (Berzonsky, 2004; Kenny & Sirin, 2006; Masten et al., 2004; Powers, Hauser, & Kilner, 1989; Smits et al., 2008; Tubman & Lerner, 1994; Van Wei, Bogt, & Raaijmakers, 2002). The ability to successfully navigate increasing independence during emerging adulthood requires the capacity to trust, and form mutually

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caring and supportive relationships through interpersonal webs and networks of interdependence (Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003).

Financial support has also become a normative component of parental relationships during the transition to adulthood, particularly within middle- to upper-class families (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005; Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005). Providing direct financial assistance, or a place to live in the family residence, entails extending parental investments to promote the educational and employment opportunities of offspring, and to provide a buffer when young adults face financial challenges.

Young adults without family ties, or whose families are financially constrained, may be at a relative disadvantage in terms of financial supports. Among racial-ethnic minority families, cultural norms may further shape lower rates of leaving home or the timing or value of establishing financial independence (DeMarco & Berzin, 2008; Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005).

### 1.2. Threats and opportunities for relational permanence among foster youth

In this paper, relational permanence is defined as a mutually committed, life-long family connection to an adult parent-figure; a central feature of a child's social ecology necessary for healthy development. It is also a concept that values one's phenomenological experience of a relationship as an enduring source of love, care, support, dependability, belonging and mutual trust (Samuels, 2008). Consequently, relational permanence is independent from the legality or genetics of a family tie; though ideally it would be present within all family relationships. Research on young adults with foster care histories indicate substantial reasons to be concerned regarding their opportunities and abilities to experience and maintain relational permanence with parental figures. First, the experience of maltreatment and trauma presents a source of vulnerability and can threaten the development of social, emotional and relational competencies through multiple pathways. Maltreatment has an impact on cognitive, affective, behavioral and relational functioning through neurophysiological adaptations which extend across the life course (Briere & Scott, 2006; Coates, 2010; Draper et al., 2008; Lansford et al., 2002). Exposed to early trauma, the developing brain can be impaired in its capacity to modulate stress (Kendall-Tackett, 2002; McCrory, De Brito, & Viding, 2011; Teicher, 2002), to engage in effective problem-solving or processing language and emotional stimuli (Choi, Jeong, Rohan, Polcari, & Teicher, 2009). It can impair one's ability for executive function and regulation of behavior (Teicher et al., 2003). Children who are maltreated early in life often develop a sensitized neurobiology such that relatively minor interpersonal threats can elicit strong negative behavioral and physiological reactions (Dozier & Rutter, 2008). Maltreatment also challenges one's emerging ability to trust relationships with caregivers, impairing accurate social cognition and one's capacities for empathy (Cicchetti & Curtis, 2005; Dodge, Pettit, Bates, & Valente, 1995; Milan & Pinderhughes, 2000).

Removing children from a context of maltreatment can be essential to provide a safe haven for healing, recovery, and healthier development. Yet removing children from their parents can also be experienced as traumatic and disruptive. Even children who are abused or neglected often form strong bonds to their parents (Moriceau & Sullivan, 2005) and will endure considerable stress during separation. A host of factors unique to foster care placement can also exacerbate or create added complexities and risks to a maltreated child's relational development. Such complexities can include having to navigate the ambiguous loss of homes, parents, and uncertainty in one's sense of belonging, trust, and family identity (Samuels, 2009). Experiencing these losses and relational disruptions across one's life can leave lasting impressions on children's expectations of current and future relationships, particularly toward adults and parent figures, as dependable or trustworthy sources of care and support.

While in care, substituting "new" homes and parent figures creates both opportunities and challenges to relational health (Lawrence, Carlson, & Egeland, 2006). Living within multiple family systems can expose youth to a wider pool of supports, diversity in family life, and expand their social networks. It can offer children opportunities to access corrective relational experiences in the context of a foster family or more permanently, within adoptive families. However, sometimes youth report feeling a sense of mixed-loyalties to more than one family system or to more than one parental figure (Samuels, 2008); strong connections to birth families (or a desire for such ties) can persist regardless of a youth's permanent plan (Collins, Paris, & Ward, 2008). Youth may worry that they, or the parental figures in their lives, will experience a dual-family connection or expression of attachment as betrayals, positioning one family tie against the other (Fahlberg, 1991). These realities can complicate a child's desires and openness to adoption (Samuels, 2009). Left unresolved, this can also cut youth off from accessing multiple sources of supports and forming multifamily identities—a potential strength and gain of having experienced one's childhood in more than one family system (Samuels, 2009).

Best practices in child welfare include pursuing legal permanence through adoption or reunification in the hopes that this also provides children with relational permanence—access to a dependable and trustworthy source of care and support across the life course. The amelioration of the impact of maltreatment on some developmental domains has been reported among youth who experience nurturing adoptive families or stable, high quality caregiving environments in homes of foster parents rather than institutions (Sheridan, Fox, Zeanah, McLaughlin, & Nelson, 2012). Yet, even when adopted, youth may not fully catch up to their non-maltreated peers (Van Ijzendoorn & Juffer, 2006), or experience legal permanence as a trusted source of relational permanence (Samuels, 2008).

Simultaneous mistrust and desire for relational permanence is particularly characteristic among older youth in foster care and youth transitioning to adulthood from foster care who did not achieve legal permanence. Research increasingly suggests that both maltreatment and foster care can negatively contribute to early adult outcomes, and disrupt relational networks of support in significant ways (Anda et al., 2006; Kerman, Wildfire, & Barth, 2002; Perry, 2006). Studies of youth aging out of foster care reveal such accumulated vulnerability, and report increased risk of poor outcomes including criminal involvement, substance abuse and mental health problems as well as the reduced likelihood of achieving competence in domains of education, employment and community involvement (Courtney et al., 2005; Kerman et al., 2002; Pecora et al., 2006).

Therefore, one major developmental challenge for foster youth in early adulthood includes learning to negotiate their own capacities and comfort for interdependence and independence in the context of complex and often disrupted family histories involving birth parent(s) and other potential parental figures (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). These distinct experiences of family and parents suggest diversity in how they might experience care, dependability and support in these relationships during early adulthood.

### 1.3. Gaps in the study of foster youth and the concept of relational permanence

This study seeks to address gaps in the study of relational permanence and is unique in several ways. First, focusing not only on the access to and use of parental supports, but also on the *qualities* of these relationships, contributes to a deeper understanding of this source of support in early adulthood. Previous studies of social support and foster youth have clearly indicated that youth (including emancipated youth) do have connections that are important to them, and highlight the centrality of biological family even for those who were not reunified (Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010; Munson & McMillen, 2009). However, less is known about the quality of the relationships they maintain in

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