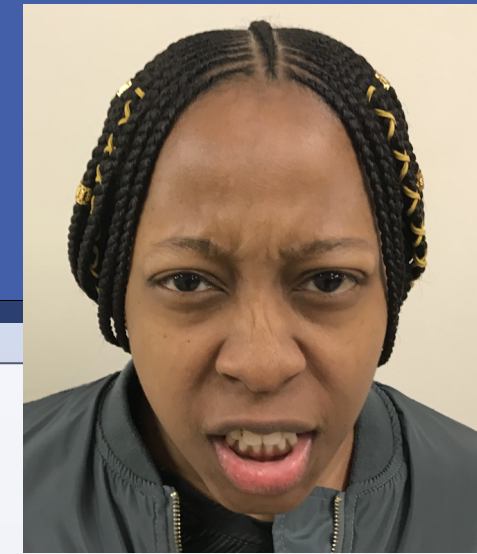


Old Enough to Have a Say, Scared Enough to Say No!

Supporting tweens & teens through preadoptive transition

Rhys Gardiner, Anni Keane, Lauren Frey, Victoria Nasanga, Jennifer Perez, Ruth McRoy PhD



Notes from the field:

If family is the primary place the trauma happened, family is the place the healing will happen.
- Lauren

Children that have long-term unmet attachment needs, what they need the MOST are primary attachment relationships. It's terrifying for them to move into the vulnerability of attachment. You will see increased behaviors from them, as they start to get feelings of connection, they will start to get feelings of fear.
- Allison

Our intention is to keep you safe. But often (in child welfare) what we're doing is breaking relationships- how can they move forward if we don't teach them how to *make* relationships?
- Anni

Child prep is AS IMPORTANT as parent prep!!!
- Lauren

THEY (teens should) get to say, when do I want to see your physical home, when do I want to stay over, when do I want to move- you give them the control. They are driving the car- of course, you (the adults) need to help them drive it, like a bumper car.
- Barry

What parents basically need to know is: The behavior is an expression of the need- 'We're taking the next step in the relationship, and it's scary!'
- Anni

Workers need to understand what 'giving consent' means- it means giving consent to the adoption, it's not giving consent for us to do our job. Older kids totally need some efficacy, need their say- our job is to try to teach.
- Michelle

If the kid refuses, I would just ask them what's going on? What fears, energies, what memories are coming up when they go on visits? We tell everyone this is going to happen, strong emotions will come up... Love is extremely scary!
- Anni

Teens and tweens (are) at the age where they are psychosocially trying to yoyo away from, out of, attachment- but if they haven't had it, they don't know how to accept it, and they need it!
- Allison

No, you don't have to be sure this is what you want for the rest of your life, you can move in and see how the relationship builds. Now we'll build a relationship, and when you're ready- YOU will decide when you're ready.
- Michelle

Loving someone, a child who has been traumatized in any way, it's very challenging, it's ugly, it looks like running away, acting out, crying, screaming, all the ugly things people are uncomfortable with, but it needs to happen. People are uncomfortable with those ugly feelings and emotions, but it needs to happen for the youth's emotional health, their spiritual health, and healing.
- Anni

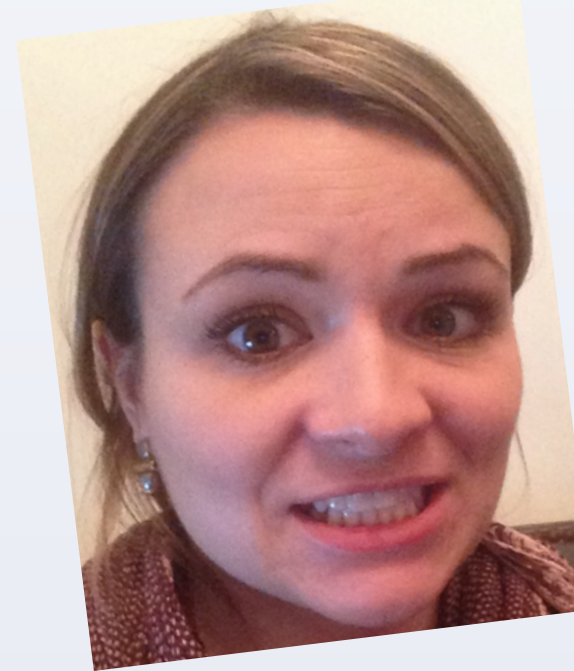
The ability of a foster parent to build a relationship with the permanent parent and work in partnership with them can make or break a successful transition for a child or youth.
-Lauren

The current caregiver's #1 job is to be a bridge to permanency. That's the whole point of the child welfare system, is to achieve permanency.
- Michelle

Where's the checklist for a teen to evaluate a prospective match? There isn't one - the only thing that matters is how committed the new parent is. If they aren't completely committed, nothing else matters; if they're completely committed to that kid, nothing else matters! Unconditional commitment- that's the mantra we teach/preach to our parents.
- Paul

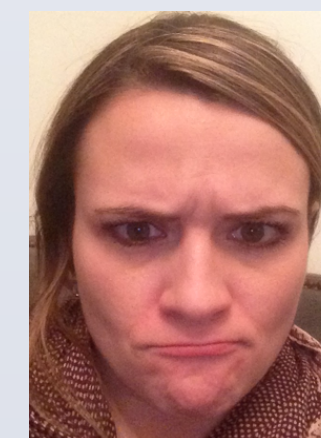
LOVE is extremely Scary!

- Anni



They don't want to lose who they are!!

-from a Youth, matched at 15



Did You Know...?

Paraphrased from talks on "Neuroscience & Permanency" by Bruce D. Perry, MD, PhD
2017 National Permanency Conference, Harmony Family Center, Nashville, TN Listen: <http://harmonyfamilycenter.org/2017-national-permanency-conference/>

What fires together, wires together:

0-5 is when our brains hardwire the patterns of our early experiences. If a child has fear, pain, unmet needs, or unpredictability, in early childhood, it can get wired into their pattern of what a "mother" is. This pattern will be used to interpret interactions with all future primary caregivers. Youth who had 0-5 trauma are at risk to misperceive and mistrust even nurturing caregivers.

Everything new is scary- good OR bad! Let the teen control their own dosing.

We manage our stress over anything new or scary by "dosing"- controlling how often and how much we allow ourselves to think about it. A youth sensitized by early trauma may need to take it slow. Dr. Perry suggests that even a skilled clinician may only be able to "dip into" the topic twice, or *maybe* three times, in a weekly session. Raising the topic, unless the teen brings it up, robs them of their controllability of the dosing- which can turn the new thing, good or bad, into a negative stressor.

Regulate, relate, reason- in that order!

With anything new, a kid's biggest need is for regulation. Supportive adults can help youth regulate and learn to self-regulate, to stay out of alarm state. When we're well-regulated, we can reason and learn.

Flock, Fight, Flight, Freeze

If a kid's stress escalates into alarm, they'll Fight, Flight or Freeze, and the higher reasoning brain shuts off. The biggest determinant in how a kid reacts to something new is, FLOCK- they look to see how their adults react. If adults are calm, kids are more likely to stay calm. If the adults show alarm, so will a kid.

Learn more: The Seven Slide Series (Youtube), Child Trauma Academy, TX

Overrepresented in substitute care, yet underrepresented in adoption, older youth need love, too! Tweens' and teens' needs for extra support in the preadoptive transition process may not be as apparent as younger children's. However, experts dedicated to permanency for older youth believe greater youth voice and coordinated support for preadoptive matches during the visiting period are crucial for success.

Issue:

Just at the age they are most likely to reject primary caregivers, youth (12+ in MA) are rightfully required to consent to formal adoption. CWIG cites a 25% preadoptive disruption rate for 12-17 yo youth in state care. Anecdotally, perhaps twice as many matches 'fizzle' before move-in! We know 'aging out' is a predictor for homelessness, early pregnancy, under-education, incarceration, and a host of health issues.

Much has been written on how to seek permanency for older youth, and on the importance of post-placement services to support families in adjustment. However, the delicate period of meeting and getting to know a new family is less examined, and offers opportunities for gain.

Goal:

ID and disseminate best practices for supporting tweens and teens in preadoptive transition

Method:

Review existing materials and conduct phone interviews with experienced practitioner/advocates, to gather useful links, innovative ideas, and direct testimony on why and how to steward preadoptive matches with tweens and teens.

Present excellence in practice and resources of immediate usefulness in a simple format accessible to busy workers, caregivers, and others who care about and work with youth.

Two valuable classics stood out:

"Breaking Barriers to Teen Adoption" video (Youtube) by You Gotta Believe, NY
"Finding a Fit to Last a Lifetime" by AdoptUsKids

Both contain timeless suggestions in a range of voices and perspectives, and informed a preference for direct quotes in our project's handout.

Outcome:

A handout of collective wisdom from those in the field!

"Old Enough to Have a Say, Scared Enough to Say No"

Including:

The "Letter for When I Freak Out"!!! Teen Safety Plan!!!

Links to Free Resources!

and

Reprints of the AdoptUsKids classic:

"Finding a Fit to Last a Lifetime"

Featuring:

The "Predictions Letter" to Parents! (p. 59)

Contributors & Acknowledgements:

Interviewed sources, in order of appearance in handout:

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