

# Supervisor Toolkit: Engaging Youth and Families to Achieve Timely Permanency for Children and Youth Waiting to Be Adopted



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Authentic engagement of youth and families is more likely to lead to permanent families for youth (Children's Bureau, 2021b). Embedding an organization's value for youth and family engagement into individual practice requires effective training, supervision, and coaching. Caseworkers must be supported in their work to authentically engage youth and families in permanency plans, prioritizing their voices without rushing the process. These thoughtful approaches to permanency are reinforced through federal guidance which cautions agencies "not to place timeliness before the substance of what best supports familial relationships and the best interest of the child" (Children's Bureau, 2021a, p.22).

## Key Components of Engaging Youth and Families in Individual Permanency Planning

Youth consistently emphasize the importance of authentic engagement to achieve permanency, elevating the need for supportive and honest relationships with professionals who center them in a meaningful and intentional way (Administration for Youth and Families Youth Engagement Team, 2020; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

Consider what your agency could do to promote an agencywide culture of youth and family engagement to achieve timely permanency through ongoing exploration of the barriers to engagement and the role leadership can play in facilitating the following components of engaging youth and families in individual permanency planning. Reflect on the following questions on your own or with your team. Are there supports that your team needs from the agency to facilitate their individual practice? How can you and your team elevate those needs to your agency's leadership?

### Build Trusting Relationships

1. What would it look like if caseloads were more manageable and caseworkers had the time to develop and nurture supportive relationships with youth and families? What could be eliminated to make time for prioritizing relationships as the foundation for engaging youth and families and for achieving permanency?
2. What are the expectations for staff as they begin talking with youth about permanency? How are staff encouraged and expected to follow the lead of youth, exploring doubts without pressuring youth to make a decision before they are ready?
3. How are you building the capacity of your teams to build relationships with youth and families? How can you elevate and replicate existing skills and practice?

### Develop a Youth- and Family-Centered Permanency Process

1. How has your agency's and your team's work been informed by youth and families with lived experience? What would it look like if your agency committed to ongoing partnership with youth and families, relying on their expertise to inform policy, programs, and practice?
2. What kind of training does your agency offer to support the development of staff skills in youth and family engagement and empowerment? What training would help your staff strengthen their practice?

#### Read this to:

- Explore the key components of engaging youth and families in individual permanency planning
- Learn more about the role of supervisors and caseworkers in shaping an agency culture of youth and family engagement to achieve permanency
- Get tips for team activities to promote youth and family engagement in permanency planning
- Share worksheets with caseworkers to reflect on their engagement practice and identify needed supports

3. How does your agency define permanency and how does that definition inform policy and practice? Consider when conversations about permanency typically begin and when supports to youth and families end. Is every child and youth expected to achieve permanency? Are postpermanency supports a routine part of your agency's work?

## Lead Meaningful Permanency Meetings

1. What resources are available to support neutral third party facilitators in permanency meetings? How could you work with leadership to ensure this becomes standard practice?
2. How are staff supported and expected to co-create meeting agendas with youth and family members of their choosing?
3. How are youth and families prepared before each meeting? What opportunities do they have to debrief and provide feedback about the process? How is that feedback used to inform subsequent meetings (or the process as a whole)?

## Next Steps

### Review and Plan

Review the toolkit in its entirety. Develop a plan to work with your team and consider how you will share what emerges from the activities and worksheets with your agency's leadership.

### Facilitate

Consider which of the following activities are a good fit for your team and could spark learning and exploration. Plan for any necessary adaptations before bringing your team together.

- ▶ Role Play: Exploring Youth Worries and Doubts
- ▶ Permanency Brainstorm
- ▶ View and Discuss

While adapting activities to include foster care alumni may offer teams an opportunity to benefit from young people's expertise, these adaptations must be approached intentionally and thoughtfully. Think through the following suggestions if your team is considering adapting activities to involve youth:

- ▶ Consider partnering with youth advisory boards or alumni speaker bureaus to determine an approach that offers meaningful participation.
- ▶ Consider depth and breadth of perspectives. A single youth should not be expected to represent the voices of all alumni or all youth in care.
- ▶ Invite youth as professional experts and advisors, not storytellers. Youth expertise is not limited to their personal lived experience and they should choose when and how to share their story, if at all.
- ▶ Avoid risk of harm, including trauma or discomfort with participation.

### Share

Share the worksheets with your team and provide a timeline for completion. Review the completed worksheets together in supervision. What are the strengths in practice that can be lifted up and replicated? What do staff need from you and the agency to be able to more consistently apply the elements of engagement? What are the systemic barriers to engagement and what could you or your agency's leaders do to address them?

### Elevate

Record staff feedback and needs that emerge during activities and supervision. Identify themes and make a plan to discuss with your manager. What can the agency do to address barriers to engagement? What are organizational and systemic changes that will support youth and family engagement in practice?

## Explore

Explore the following resources. Identify insights and learning you want to discuss with your team, as well as resources, ideas, and questions that you want to share with your manager to promote an agency culture of youth and family engagement to achieve permanency.

### Series

- ▶ [National Foster Care Month](#) (Child Welfare Information Gateway)

### Publications

- ▶ [Administration for Children and Families Youth Engagement Team: Recommendations for Improving Permanency and Well-Being](#) (Children's Bureau)
- ▶ [Belonging Matters—Helping Youth Explore Permanency](#), (AdoptUSKids/Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- ▶ [Talking With Older Youth About Adoption](#), (AdoptUSKids/Child Welfare Information Gateway)

### Webinars

- ▶ [Engage Youth: Listen and Learn](#), (AdoptUSKids/Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- ▶ [Youth Voices: Why Family Matters](#), (AdoptUSKids/Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- ▶ [Engaging Youth in Writing Their Narratives](#), (AdoptUSKids)





## Engaging Youth and Families to Achieve Timely Permanency: Activities

Use the following activities with your team (or adapt for use in supervision) to promote reflection about meaningful youth and family engagement in permanency planning.

### Role Play: Exploring Youth Worries and Doubts

**Why:** Youth may have serious concerns and hesitancy about permanency or adoption and caseworkers may struggle with how to respond with validation and encouragement.

**Who:** This activity can be done in teams or in one-on-one supervision.

**How:** Engage your team in a role play in which one team member plays the role of a youth who is expressing a lack of interest in permanency, while another team member plays the role of the caseworker.

1. Ask for two volunteers to start the role play.
2. Instruct the “actors” to role play a series of conversations in which the youth expresses skepticism about permanency, while the caseworker helps them develop an understanding of what permanency might look like in their life.
3. Encourage the other team members to provide feedback and suggestions to the caseworker throughout the role play.
4. If you choose to use this activity in one-on-one supervision, begin with the supervisor playing the youth role.

### Suggestions

- ▶ Use real concerns that youth have shared, such as being disconnected from or disloyal to their family, reluctance to change their last name, a desire for independence, and negative experiences in foster care. Think about adolescent development and how youth communicate.
- ▶ Work to find the root causes of the youth’s hesitation. Try to keep moving the conversation forward without pushing too hard.
- ▶ Build in breaks for team feedback and to reflect the reality that these conversations happen over time.
- ▶ Offer all team members an opportunity to practice the caseworker role.

### Follow Up

After your team has had time to apply insights from this activity in practice, bring your team back together and revisit the activity. Have any changes in practice emerged? What has your team learned from youth since engaging in the activity? What has worked well? What are the barriers to exploring youth worries and doubts in practice? Are there opportunities to elevate those barriers with agency leadership?

**Use the space below to jot down ideas for using this activity with your team.**



## Permanency Brainstorm

**Why:** Caseworkers may struggle to explain permanency in simple, accessible language and may benefit from clear examples to which youth can relate.

**Who:** This activity can be done in teams or adapted for use in supervision.

**How:**

1. Send each participant the following pre-reading activities:
  - a. [“Talking With Older Youth About Adoption”](#) (AdoptUSKids/Child Welfare Information Gateway)
  - b. [“Belonging Matters – Helping Youth Explore Permanency”](#) (AdoptUSKids/Child Welfare Information Gateway)
2. Facilitate a discussion about different definitions of permanency and the difference between permanency as a child welfare outcome and permanency in a youth’s life.
3. Divide large teams into small groups of three to four people. Give each group the following set of instructions.
  - a. Identify a recorder and a reporter.
  - b. Brainstorm youth-friendly definitions of the following terms and concepts:
    - i. Permanency
    - ii. Legal permanency
    - iii. Relational permanency
    - iv. Guardianship
    - v. Adoption
    - vi. Aging out
  - c. Brainstorm three to four examples of permanency that bring the definitions to life.
4. Ask each group to report out and offer opportunities to give each other feedback.
5. Bring the compiled definitions and examples to a team of youth that your agency works with for their review and feedback.
6. Compile the revised definitions and examples and distribute to team members.

## Follow Up

Bring your team back together and revisit the activity. Have any changes in practice emerged? What have staff learned from youth since engaging in the activity? What definitions and examples resonate with youth? Are there opportunities to have a conversation with leadership about what your team has learned?

**Use the space below to jot down ideas for using this activity with your team.**

## View and Discuss

**Why:** Recorded webinars provide an opportunity for the viewer to hear directly from youth about their experiences with engagement and its importance in permanency.

**Who:** This activity can be done in teams or adapted for use in supervision.

**How:**

1. Select which of the following recorded webinars your team will discuss and send it out to team members.
  - a. [Engage Youth: Listen and Learn](#) (2020 National Adoption Month webinar, AdoptUSKids/Child Welfare Information Gateway)
  - b. Youth Voices: Why Family Matters (2019 National Adoption Month webinar, AdoptUSKids/Child Welfare Information Gateway)
2. Plan your meeting. Bring your team together to talk about connections to their own experiences, apply concepts and identify future action steps, and tie together the lessons learned.
3. In addition, consider asking the following:
  - a. What are some critical engagement strategies identified by youth in the webinars?
  - b. What are some steps you can take to build engagement into your practice?
  - c. What do you need from your supervisor or your agency to more authentically engage youth?
  - d. Engage in follow up discussion to share, reflect on, and celebrate changes to practice.

## Follow Up

Bring your team back together and revisit the activity. Have any changes in practice emerged? Are there opportunities to have a conversation with leadership about what your team has learned?

**Use the space below to jot down ideas for using this activity with your team.**

## Engaging Youth and Families to Achieve Timely Permanency: Caseworker Worksheets

Each of the following worksheets is intended for caseworkers to reflect on their own practice.

Thinking about your own practice, reflect on the following opportunities to strengthen engagement and check the appropriate box to indicate how you engage in the listed practice (**I consistently do this, I sometimes do this, I could use some help**). These examples are not exhaustive. The worksheet includes space for you to write additional examples and identify strengths and needs.

Once complete, bring this worksheet to supervision and talk with your supervisor about opportunities to strengthen practice, including agency or system supports that could address barriers to best practice.

### Build Trusting Relationships

Building trust and authentically engaging with youth and families takes time and consistency. Some older youth may have had their trust broken by adults in various roles and may have difficulty trusting the professionals working with them as well as foster and prospective adoptive families.

Elements of Engagement	I consistently do this	I sometimes do this	I could use some help
I encourage and enable strong relationships among parents, relatives, youth, and foster or kinship caregivers, regardless of the permanency goal.			
I start conversations about permanency with youth and families as early as possible.			
I take the time to encourage youth and families to share their questions, fears and concerns.			
I steer away from implying that any permanency scenario will be perfect.			
I admit when I do not know the answer to a question.			
I avoid pressuring youth into making a decision before they are ready.			
I assume that every youth will receive permanency and ask myself what I have not yet tried when I hit roadblocks.			
I avoid canceling meetings with youth and families.			
I practice active listening to both verbal and non-verbal communication during meetings with youth and families.			
I show up on time for meetings with youth and families.			
I follow up with next steps after meetings with youth and families.			
I understand and use developmentally appropriate ways youth engagement strategies.			



What are some examples of what you do (or could do) to build trusting relationships?

What are your biggest strengths in building trusting relationships?

What challenges are you experiencing as you work to build trusting relationships?

What do you need from your supervisor or agency to help you consistently apply the elements of engagement to build trusting relationships?

Thinking about your own practice, reflect on the following opportunities to strengthen engagement and check the appropriate box to indicate how you engage in the listed practice (**I consistently do this, I sometimes do this, I could use some help**). These examples are not exhaustive. The worksheet includes space for you to write additional examples and identify strengths and needs.

Once complete, bring this worksheet to supervision and talk with your supervisor about opportunities to strengthen practice, including agency or system supports that could address barriers to best practice.

## Develop a Youth- and Family-Centered Process

Youth and families, including prospective adoptive families, prospective kinship families, and other people the youth identifies as family, should be centered in the permanency process. They should feel respected and heard at every phase of the process.

Elements of Engagement	I consistently do this	I sometimes do this	I could use some help
I use clear examples to help youth understand the concept of permanency, the definitions of legal and relational permanency, what guardianship and adoption mean (and how they differ from foster care), and the planning process.			
I help youth explore the pros and cons of legal and relational permanency.			
I give youth and families plenty of time to share their perspectives and questions.			
I steer away from implying that any permanency scenario will be perfect.			
I connect youth with their peers who have received permanency, if possible.			
I explore with youth what they are worried they might lose and what they think they might gain through permanency.			
I take the time to help families (including families of origin and prospective kinship or adoptive families) process some of their fears and concerns.			
I talk with families about the different opportunities to play an ongoing role in youths' lives, including legal and relational permanency.			
I talk with families about some of the hurdles they may face throughout the adoption or guardianship process and how other families have worked to overcome them.			
I ask youth about how they would like to be involved and give them the option to highlight who they are and their permanency goals.			
I recognize that youth and families need support prior to and after permanency is received.			
I work with youth and families to identify potential sources of formal and informal supports during and after permanency.			

What are some examples of what you do (or could do) to develop a youth- and family-centered process?

What are your biggest strengths in developing a youth- and family-centered process?

What challenges are you experiencing as you work to develop a youth- and family-centered process?

What do you need from your supervisor or agency to help you consistently apply the elements of engagement to develop a youth- and family-centered process?



Thinking about your own practice, reflect on the following opportunities to strengthen engagement and check the appropriate box to indicate how you engage in the listed practice (**I consistently do this, I sometimes do this, I could use some help**). These examples are not exhaustive. The worksheet includes space for you to write additional examples and identify strengths and needs.

Once complete, bring this worksheet to supervision and talk with your supervisor about opportunities to strengthen practice, including agency or system supports that could address barriers to best practice.

## Lead Meaningful Permanency Meetings

Permanency meetings should feel productive and meaningful to the youth and families participating. Their perspectives and expertise should be valued and prioritized as decisions are made.

Elements of Engagement	I consistently do this	I sometimes do this	I could use some help
I clearly outline the permanency planning process, where and how decisions will be made (including the role of the courts), and the role that youth and families will play, including the level of influence youth and families will have on the final plan.			
I make sure that meeting discussions are clear and that I (and other team members) avoid jargon and talking down to youth or families.			
I validate and explore youth and family perspectives and provide clear explanations and rationale when the agency has to take an alternate approach.			
I recognize that youth and families have expertise that is as (or more) valuable than professional training and education.			
I provide rich opportunities for youth and family to share and incorporate their expertise into the permanency plan.			
I develop permanency meeting agendas and goals in partnership with youth and others of their choosing.			
I schedule time to prepare youth and families before each meeting and to debrief afterwards.			
I provide incentives and reinforcements for youth attendance.			
I ensure that permanency meetings are facilitated by a neutral third party who does not play a role in plan development, decision making, or other parts of the process. The facilitator should ensure that youth and family voice is prioritized, heard, and validated.			
I gather feedback from youth and family members and use it to inform subsequent meetings.			
I commit to follow up on what was discussed and decided in the meeting and do so in a timely fashion.			
I proactively maintain communication with the youth and other meeting attendees between meetings			

What are some examples of what you do (or could do) to lead meaningful permanency meetings?

What are your biggest strengths in leading meaningful permanency meetings?

What challenges are you experiencing as you work to lead meaningful permanency meetings?

What do you need from your supervisor or agency to help you consistently apply the elements of engagement to lead meaningful permanency meetings?

## References

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