What do transition-age youth need to succeed? Chapin Hall and the Selfless Love Foundation convened a two-day think tank with foster care alumni, child welfare leaders, researchers, caseworkers and advocates to explore this question. Together, we developed the following lessons for child welfare systems.

**LESSONS**

**Define permanent connections**

As each group came to a shared understanding of what permanent connections are and what value they hold for young people, they highlighted important characteristics:

- **Stable:** Lifelong, ongoing, in it for the long run, mutual and reciprocal, unconditional commitment, strong, dependable, reliable, non-transactional
- **Trusting:** Safe, steady, shared power, chosen, available, go-to people, sense of belonging
- **Flexible:** Help with concrete needs or relational needs, resilient, can be different roles—friend, mentor, parent
- **Nonjudgmental:** Nonbiased, mutual respect, open, honest
- **Developmentally appropriate:** Appropriate expectations of youth, meet them where they are at, experience growth together, respect autonomy

**Embrace the complexity of kin connections—and prioritize them anyway**

Many participants said the lived-expert panel’s description of their experiences with foster care deeply resonated with them. This was particularly true regarding love and loss in relationships with biological family members. Many young people shared mixed emotions about their biological parents and challenges they faced. Sibling relationships also require more attention from child welfare professionals. These professionals should not just provide mandatory sibling visits but also encourage natural, ongoing contact and mutual healing. When these bonds are broken, it intensifies the feelings of sadness and loneliness that can accompany life in foster care.
Move from support that focuses on “checklists” to focus on relationships

Discussions touched on how caseworkers often engage in transition planning as a series of tasks required by rules. Some participants, however, shared local examples of transition planning that empower young adults and are driven by youth. These models focus on relationships, working together to handle transition tasks while using the natural supports each young person has. They were found to be more appropriate for development, more humane, and more helpful.

Youth deserve choices

Many discussions emphasized the importance of choice in the lives of emerging adults as outlined in a foster care bill of rights. Young people, especially those leaving care, need to have their voices heard when important decisions are made about their lives. These decisions include where they live, who they spend time with, and their goals for permanency. Child welfare systems don’t always see young people as experts in their own lives, which can discourage certain choices, like returning to a biological parent who lost custody. Instead of pushing alternatives, such as moving to a shelter or getting their own apartment, the system could support them in healing and rebuilding these relationships as they move toward independence. Additionally, youth may face challenges with benefits eligibility if they reunite with family after leaving care. Participants described this as a difficult situation that creates barriers for foster care graduates.

Redefining Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) as an intentional pathway to adulthood, not a failure of “permanency”.

The SOUL Family Model presents a path toward independence that does not involve adoption, guardianship, or reunification. Participants were enthusiastic about this approach for long-term stability. Young people aiming for independence after leaving care can benefit from a more deliberate approach that prepares them for the opportunities and challenges they will encounter on their journey.

Intentional youth engagement

Participants recognized the need for improved engagement with youth regardless of their permanency goals during their time in foster care. At the administrative level, this involves accountable feedback mechanisms (such as youth boards, follow ups with alumni, and surveys) to hear from transition-age youth about how the system is serving them. At an individual level, this means ensuring that adults have the skills to engage with youth effectively making them feel heard, supported, and connected.

Focus on how to prepare young people for planning spaces

SOUL Family and Epic ‘Ohana program both prepare young people for important planning meetings and youth circles. This preparation helps them build the skills and confidence to lead discussions about their future when these groups meet. Helping a young person prepare might involve explaining the process, managing expectations, choosing who will attend, addressing anxiety and concerns, and practicing skills like speaking up effectively during collaborative planning. Participants believed this approach would lead to more successful planning meetings and development of more meaningful, achievable goals for themselves.

Read the full report: Feeling ‘Plugged In’: Promoting Connection After Care.