



TAY-Hub

Transition-Age Youth
Research & Evaluation Hub

THE ROLE OF ENDURING RELATIONSHIPS ON YOUTH OUTCOMES



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Significance

Child welfare policies for transition-age youth (TAY) are the subject of two significant critiques. The first is that policies strongly emphasize helping TAY build skills for independent living, even though research has found *interdependent* living to be healthy and normative in emerging adulthood. Second, child welfare policies prioritize legal permanence even though many legally “permanent” relationships do not last, and youth tend to define permanence in terms of the love, care, and dependability of a relationship, rather than in biological or

legal terms. Both of these critiques call for a greater focus on relational permanence, defined as the formation of life-long relationships with family-like people who are important to and supportive of the youth. Given that youth aging out of foster care often lack strong familial support networks and are likely to have experienced numerous placement changes, it is imperative that child welfare policymakers, practitioners, and researchers understand the prevalence of enduring relationships for this population and their impact on early adulthood outcomes.

Study Methods

This study analyzes data collected by the CalYOUTH Study, which included a representative sample of over 700 TAY in California foster care at age 17 who were interviewed multiple times as they transitioned to adulthood. When youth were interviewed at ages 17 and 21, they were asked to name specific people they could turn to for emotional support, tangible support, and advice. In this study we identified “enduring relationships”, that is, individuals TAY named as a support person at both age 17 and age 21. Importantly, these individuals were present in TAYs’ lives as they made the transition out of foster care.

THE CURRENT BRIEF SEEKS TO ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- ✓ What proportion of TAY had an enduring relationship (i.e., a person who could be turned to for support at ages 17 and 21)?
- ✓ What types of support did TAY receive from their enduring relationships (i.e., emotional support, tangible support, and/or advice)?
- ✓ Did having an enduring relationship affect youths’ outcomes in early adulthood? Did it matter whom the enduring relationship was with?

Findings

1

About half of study participants (48%) had an enduring relationship.

We found significant variability in the prevalence of enduring relationships between youth across racial groups.

2

Enduring relationships tended to be with biological family members, foster and adoptive parents, and individuals they described as family-like.

Compared to other supportive relations that were more short-lived, enduring relationships were more likely to provide youth with multiple types of support (especially emotional support and tangible support).

3

Having an enduring relationship protected TAY from several hardships.

Youth with an enduring relationship experienced fewer economic hardships, were less likely to be food insecure, were less likely to be homeless, and spent less time being homeless.

4

Enduring relationships with specific types of people sometimes had specific effects on their outcomes.

For instance, enduring relationships with family and family-like individuals protected youth against economic hardships, food insecurity, and homelessness. Enduring relationships with peers increased the likelihood that youth entered and completed at least one year of college.

Implications

This study found that having an enduring relationship has real, material consequences for TAY. Yet, about half of youth aging out of foster care may not have such a relationship. While increasing the prevalence of enduring relationships is important for all TAY, it is especially pressing for Black and Native American youth who were found to be less likely than their peers to have an enduring relationship.

It is important for child welfare policy to prioritize relational permanence for TAY. This may involve reconceptualizing permanency and changing policies to center a strong social support network that will continue to support a youth after leaving foster care.

- Child welfare practice models should include identifying and enhancing relationships with individuals that are already present in a youth's life, as well as seeking out and building new connections.
- TAY and their families should be included in the process to revamp policies and practice.
- Future research will benefit from developing new measures of relational permanence that can capture the number and types of relationships, as well as youths' own perceptions and understandings of relationships that feel permanent to them.



READ THE FULL STUDY:

Okpych, N. J., Park, S., Powers, J., Harty, J. S., & Courtney, M. E. (2023). Relationships that persist and protect: The role of enduring relationships on early-adult outcomes among youth transitioning out of foster care. *Social Service Review*, 97(4), 000–000. <https://doi.org/10.1086/724736>