CHAPIN HALL
CENTER FOR CHILDREN
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

A Reason, a Season,
or a Lifetime:
*Relational Permanence
Among Young Adults
with Foster Care
Backgrounds*

GINA MIRANDA SAMUELS

2008

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Author

Gina Miranda Samuels
Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago

Acknowledgments

Recommended Citation
Samuels, G.M. (2008) *A Reason, a Season, or a Lifetime: Relational Permanence Among Young Adults with Foster Care Backgrounds.* Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The phenomenon labeled "aging out" includes approximately 20,000 young people who enter adulthood directly from foster care each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). The number of young people who aged out of care in the U.S. in 2005, the year for which the most current statistics are available, increased 48 percent since 1995. Internationally, growing attention is afforded to this population as research continues to indicate a startling range of risks to their adulthood success, including homelessness, poverty, incarceration, victimization, early pregnancy, and unemployment (Barth, 1990; Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2005). Among the few studies that have specifically explored mental health and well-being, research likewise suggests that this population faces higher risks to their socio-emotional wellness (Lawrence, Carlson, & Egeland, 2006; Pecora et al., 2005). Legislation under the Foster Care Independence Act (Pub. L. 106-169) and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) (Pub. L. 106-169, Pub. L. 99-272) financially supports many existing efforts to create more successful adulthoods for this population. These programs, often called independent living or transitional living programs, typically focus on important skill building in the areas of education, finance, employment, hygiene/ health, and housing (Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003). However, the field continues to struggle with developing other aspects of successful adulthoods for children formerly in foster care, most notably their socio-emotional well-being. Many of these struggles represent enduring tensions and historical challenges embedded within child welfare practice. How do we form family-like connections and supports for young people aging out of care when we have failed to do so while these same young people were in care? How do we help young people to develop relational skills and interpersonal connections as a component of programs with the specific goal of developing their independent living skills? What relational networks do these young adults have, and how might these networks provide support, or not, across the life course? What are the unique roles of adults, both kin and nonkin, during these early transitional years?

Increasingly, research suggests that having a permanent supportive relationship with, and feeling connected to, an adult matters in the long- and short-term well-being of youth and young adults (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002). This is typically provided through one's family system via parents and adult relatives in

one's extended family network. More recent scholarship on the role of mentors (Spencer, 2006) and "very important" adults (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002) broadens our lens to recognize the role of informal and formal relationships between young people and those to whom they are not related. However, for those whose lives and family systems have been restructured by out-of-home placements, connections to a family-based support system (both biological and foster) can become tenuous or fractured (Perry, 2006). The experience of multiple moves typical of children who remain in care can further challenge these young people in building personal and familial relationships with adults or caregivers. As they grow up and move into adulthood, there may be few adults who possess intimate knowledge of who they are or who can respond to their individual needs for social support in ways that reflect a shared history. These young people may miss out on normative opportunities to build important relational and social skills that can be essential to accessing and sustaining the very relationships research suggests are essential. However, little is known about the supportive relationships and networks these youth *do* maintain, and how these relationships do or do not serve as permanent family connections. If we are to improve our services and supports to this group of young people, it is important to have data that can guide work with this population. Tapping the insights of those whose lives these programs target can both enhance existing knowledge and be used to improve the design of programs and interventions that help them in building positive, supportive, and lasting relationships.

Through the use of in-depth interviews and personal network maps, this project aims to gain a better understanding of the social support networks among Opportunity Passport™ participants.[1] Likewise, this study seeks to capture a range of relationships in terms of their importance from the perspective of the young person and to understand the nature of these supportive relationships, both family/ kin relationships and nonkin relationships. This project uses a foster care–relevant framework in exploring these networks by recognizing that participants may define their family relationships in ways that extend beyond biological connections, including familial ties formed during care and after exiting foster care.

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1 The Opportunity Passport™ within Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative is a package of resources that help young people make successful transitions to adulthood. It has the following three distinct components: a matched savings account; a personal banking account for short-term use; and "door openers," which include opportunities to access education, housing, jobs, and internships. Financial literacy is a core element and financial management a key skill taught to participants. The Opportunity Passport™ is available to youth until they are 24 years old. The Initiative supports Opportunity Passport™ sites through grantees across the United States. Four Opportunity Passport™ sites were used to recruit the youth who participated in this study. Those sites will remain anonymous within this report.

Finally, this study is informed by a conceptualization of foster care and removal from one's biological parent(s), multiple placement moves, and other social network disruptions (Perry, 2006) as ambiguous losses (see Boss, 1999). The findings support other work in this area (Boss, 1999; Lee & Whiting, 2007) and further suggest that experiencing and learning to cope with ambiguous loss can shape and inform how young people interpret their social worlds into adulthood and form close relationships, and can affect their sense of these relationships as permanent or enduring across the life course. This discussion closes by sharing participants' insights on discerning a relationship's closeness and their general understanding of permanence in relationships. Here, the use of the poem "A Reason, a Season, or a Lifetime" (author unknown) by some participants is used as a framework for understanding relational impermanence in ways that included even their closest of relationships.

Key Findings

The data used for this study came from in-depth semistructured interviews and personal network maps constructed with twenty-nine youth and young adults who had participated in Opportunity Passport™.[2] Four Opportunity Passport™ sites were selected based upon their regional location in the United States (West Coast, East Coast, South, Midwest) as well as for their length of time in operation. Two represent newer sites operating less than 2 years. Two were more long-standing sites of over 2 years. All participants were out of care at the time of these interviews, and they ranged in age from 17 to 26 years old. Most participants ($n = 23$) were between the ages of 19 and 23 years. The majority of respondents were single, four were married, and eleven were parents. All parents had custody of their children. These young adults experienced a range of placement settings including adoption ($n = 5$). Two of these adoptions dissolved before the participant reached age 17. In both cases, these adoptions were by family members. In a third case, a participant reported being adopted by his biological mother a few years after his mother's rights had been terminated by the court.

Analysis of the interviews and network maps produced the following key findings:

- All participants have an existing support network. This network is typically composed of adult biological/adoptive/foster family members (kin) and friends. The vast majority of participants ($n = 28$) only listed relationships with people they had known for 2 years or more.
- Normative supportive relationships with adults include supports from child welfare professionals. Participants did not see most of these relationships as

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2 Most young people were currently participating in Opportunity Passport™ at the time of their interviews in 2007. However, those who were 24 and over (*n = 5*) had already aged out of Opportunity Passport™.

permanent, despite wishes or preferences among some that they be "forever."

- Emotional support was the most support most frequently noted as being both needed and missing by youth and young adults in foster care.

- Inner-circle members also included persons with dual roles (e.g., sister/mom) and/or individuals who provide multiple supports.

- Ambiguous loss was present throughout the stories of participants as they explained how they learned to cope with people coming in and out of their lives. The poem "A Reason, a Season, or a Lifetime" (author unknown) was specifically referenced by some as helpful in coping with relational impermanence. Most conveyed a sense of hoping for permanence in relationships but not being confident of the certainty of this or perceiving it as something under their control.

Recommendations

1) The identification of emotional support as a missing and much needed support must not be taken lightly. It was viewed as an essential support among this population both while in care and in early adulthood. Emotional support should be considered an umbrella term under which a range of supports exist including formal mental health interventions (e.g., counseling/therapy), peer or facilitated counseling, support groups, a reconsidered role of caseworkers and foster parents, and the development of existing informal network members as emotional supports.

2) This study supports a youth development (Collins, 2004) philosophy of child welfare practice, specifically in considering how to establish and sustain relational permanence in the lives of older youth in foster care. Central to this is the development of relational skills to sustain interpersonal connections. This includes challenging the very notion of "independent living" toward more interdependent and interrelated notions of healthy adulthood (Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003).

3) In thinking about relational permanence, the role of biological family must be extended beyond that family's official or legal status in a child's permanency plan. Biological family remains psychologically present for participants despite their physical separation. Taking a family-centered approach that recognizes multiple family relationships, memberships, and affiliations could represent an important philosophical, policy, and practice shift. In this way, the need for one's vigilant allegiance to a single family setting may be lessened by a child welfare approach that engages a more broad and dynamic conceptualization of family.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon called "aging out" includes approximately 20,000 young people who enter adulthood directly from foster care each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). The number of youth and young adults who aged out of care in the U.S. in 2005, the year for which the most current statistics are available, increased 48 percent since 1995. Internationally, growing attention is afforded to this population as research continues to indicate a startling range of risks to their adulthood success, including homelessness, poverty, incarceration, victimization, early pregnancy, and unemployment (Barth, 1990; Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2005). The few studies that have specifically explored mental health and well-being likewise suggest that this population faces high risks to their socio-emotional wellness (Lawrence, Carlson, & Egeland, 2006; Pecora et al., 2005). Legislation under the Foster Care Independence Act (Pub. L. 106-169) and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) (Pub. L. 106-169, Pub. L. 99-272) financially and philosophically supports many existing efforts to create more successful adulthood for this population. These programs, often called independent living or transitional living programs, typically focus on important skill building in the areas of education, finance, employment, hygiene/health, and housing (Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003). However, the field continues to struggle with developing other aspects of successful adulthood, most notably socio-emotional well-being. Many of these struggles represent enduring tensions and historical challenges embedded within child welfare practice. How do we form family-like connections and supports around youth and young adults aging out of care when we have failed to do so while these same young people were in care? How do we help them to develop relational skills and interpersonal connections as a component of programs with the specific goal of developing their skills for *independent* living? What relational networks do young people have, and how might they provide support, or not, across the life course? What are the unique

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roles of adults, both kin and nonkin, during these early transitional years? Tapping the insights of those whose lives these programs target can both enhance existing data and be used to improve the design of programs and interventions that help them in building positive, supportive, and lasting relationships.

Through the use of in-depth interviews and personal network maps, this project sought to understand the social support networks among Opportunity Passport™ participants. Likewise, this study captures a range of relationships in terms of their importance from the perspective of the young person and the nature of these supportive relationships, both family/kin relationships and nonkin relationships. This project uses a foster care–relevant framework to explore these networks by recognizing that participants may define their family relationships in ways that extend beyond biological connections, including familial ties formed during care and after exiting foster care. Finally, this study is informed by a conceptualization of foster care–removal from one's biological parent/s, multiple placement moves, and other social network disruptions (Perry, 2006)—as ambiguous losses (see Boss, 1999). These findings support other work in this area (Boss, 1999; Lee & Whiting, 2007) and suggest that experiencing and learning to cope with ambiguous loss can shape and inform how participants interpret their social worlds and form close relationships, and can affect their sense of these relationships as permanent or enduring across the life course.

First, I will briefly review the literature relevant to understanding the interviews and their analysis. This is followed by a description of the study's methods and procedures in collecting and analyzing data. I then introduce and explore the findings, highlighting thematic or patterned responses as well as some unique but less dominant experiences among participants. The report closes with a discussion of these findings, in which connections are made to existing scholarship and theory and proposed next steps for practice and research in this area.

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The developmental period between the ages of 18 and 25 is increasingly recognized as a stage of transition, a moment of delayed or "emerging" adulthood (Arnett, 2000) where one is neither adolescent nor fully adult. Typically, research on this stage of development has relied upon samples from a predominantly white, middle-class population. Although this body of research has produced important insights into the changing landscape of normative developmental trajectories, this research has overlooked certain populations (Osgood et al., 2005). Youth and young adults aging out of foster care represent one such population. As increasing numbers of young middle- to upper-middle-class adults in their early 20s return home from college to receive a range of familial and instrumental supports from parents, young people exiting foster care may not enjoy such resources. A growing body of research on outcomes for this population places them at increased risk for homelessness, victimization, incarceration, unemployment, early pregnancy, poverty, and mental health problems (Courtney & Hughes Heuring, 2005). These outcomes not only represent the long-term effects of experiencing childhood traumas of neglect and abuse but also of enduring traumatic experiences while in care (Courtney, Skyles, et al., 2005), as well as the loss of their secured membership in, and consequently their access to the resources of, a stable and permanent family system that might buffer them from increased risks (Samuels & Pryce, under review).

This does not mean, however, that all young adults aging out of foster care literally have "no family." Young people who run away from their foster care placements have been found to run home for the sole purpose of connecting with biological parents, siblings, and extended family members (Courtney, Skyles, et al., 2005). Youth and young adults are reported to return to their biological family systems upon exiting care (Chapman, Wall, & Barth, 2004; Jones & Kruk, 2005; Kufeldt, Armstrong, & Dorosh, 1995), and they often maintain their connections to biological siblings despite being placed in separate homes. In fact, biological siblings are particularly noted throughout the literature as offering essential types of support—ranging from emotional support to a crucial sense of companionship with someone else who has been through a similar, if not the same, experience (Harrison, 1999; Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Mullender, 1999). However, these reunions with biological family members, specifically biological parents, are complicated by histories of abuse and neglect and a lack of information or confusion among youth in foster care about the reasons they entered care (Unrau, 2006). It would be a mistake, therefore, to interpret their drive to connect with

biological family systems as free of conflict or mixed emotions. These relationships and feelings about their biological parents in particular are often ambiguous and left unresolved or unaddressed while young people are in foster care (Samuels & Pryce, under review). Moreover, youth perspective studies have long noted that young people in foster care, like many other individuals, define family using more socially constructed versus biologically constructed definitions and criteria (Kufeldt et al., 1994; Samuels & Curry, 2006). Consequently, although it is well known that biological family plays a central role in the lives and minds of most young people in foster care, it is less well known how various members of one's *self-defined* family play a role in his or her social support network. Through the analysis of the interviews and personal network maps, this study explores young adults' perceptions of family, the permanence of these relational ties, and the role they play as a supportive resource during the early adult years.

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The Role of Nonparental Adults in the Lives of Adolescents and Young Adults

Scholarship on youth aging out of care, as well as research focusing on other "at-risk" populations, has consistently recognized the importance of nonparental adults in the lives of young people and their positive development (Massinga & Pecora, 2004; Perry, 2006; Propp et al., 2003). Feeling connected to an adult has been found to have positive effects not only on general well-being and socio-emotional health (Massinga & Pecora, 2004), but also can buffer some of the negative outcomes this population is reported to face (Perry, 2006). Although few studies have explicitly examined social support networks among youth in foster care (see Perry, 2006, as an exception), a general acceptance of the importance of a range of supports for this population persists. It is not surprising that mentors and nonkin adults have emerged as popular resources in providing relational adult supports for young people with foster care backgrounds (Mech, Pryde, & Rycraft, 1995).

Existing research in the area of mentorship and the role of nonparental adults has focused on the potential for these relationships to improve the lives of children often labeled "at risk." Such relationships are typically seen as compensatory resources for children who either lack parental support or have strained familial relationships. The few studies that have explored relationships between young people and adults (including adult kin relationships) identify them as protective

and as a source of resilience with positive effects on psychosocial adjustment and overall well-being (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002).

Sociological studies have found differences between kin and nonkin relationships in both their permanence and function. These studies suggest that relationships with kin are more permanent and offer a broader range of supports, whereas nonkin relationships are temporal and may be more limited in the scope of supports offered (Litwak & Szelenyi, 1969; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). Other research cautions, further, that not all mentoring or nonparental relationships young people experience with adults lead to the positive outcomes so often hoped for (Spencer, 2006). Particularly within programs that do not require longer than a 1-year commitment from their mentors (Spencer, 2006), the high turnover rates of volunteers can be experienced by youth as another loss topping a host of previous relational disruptions.

…understanding the normative and unique paths through which young people with foster care backgrounds develop relationships with the important adults in their lives, including family members with whom they may not always have lived while growing up, is an important contribution of this project.

Scholars have begun to challenge the utility of arranged or assigned relationships between young people and nonkin adults, particularly mentoring relationships, as an intervention or response to a negative event or for the purpose of changing negative behaviors. Beam et al. (2002) argue that instead, many youth develop relationships with important adults and mentors as a normative aspect of their development. These are often referred to as "naturally" occurring relationships that gradually emerge between a youth and his/her teacher, coach, or the parents of friends (Beam, et al., 2002). Consequently, understanding the normative and unique paths through which young people with foster care backgrounds develop relationships with the important adults in their lives, including family members with whom they may not always have lived while growing up, is an important contribution of this project. What are the naturally occurring relationships that emerge between this group of young people and the adults within the contexts of their development? What is the role of the extended foster family system, caseworkers, program staff, and older adults who also share a background in foster care? This study provides some insight into these questions.

The Role of Programs in Transitioning Out of Care

In response to concerns regarding the adult outcomes of youth and young adults transitioning out of care, the Foster Care Independence Act (Pub. L. 106-169) and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) were signed into law on December 14, 1999. This legislation, which amended the 1986 Title IV-E Independent Living Initiative (Pub. L. 99-272), removed some age barriers attached to gaining independent living services, doubled funding, and provided funds to support postsecondary education, vocational training, housing, health care, and counseling until the age of 21. However, despite existing research and this legislation's recognition of needs among youth in foster care for relational skill building and family-like connections, most programmatic efforts have emphasized more technical skill building and such tangible outcomes as housing, education, and finance management (Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003). Although these skills are equally important, relational skills are some of the most crucial assets threatened by a childhood experience of trauma and abuse, separation from biological family, and ambiguous ties to a family system. For those whose lives and family systems have been restructured by out-of-home placements, connections to a family-based support system and enduring relationships with nonkin adults can become fractured and disrupted (Jones & Kruk, 2005). Experiencing the multiple moves typical of children who remain in care can challenge young people in building personal and familial attachments and a sense of belonging (Bamba & Haight, 2006). As foster children grow up and move into adulthood, there may be few adults who possess intimate knowledge of them, or who can respond to their individual needs for social support in ways that reflect a depth of personal connection over long periods of time (Samuels & Pryce, under review). Therefore, developing and maintaining permanent relationships may be at risk for this group, in part because of the lack of an available adult who has been consistently and deeply involved in their lives. However, little is known about the supportive relationships and networks they do maintain, and how these relationships do or do not serve as permanent family connections. From whom do young adults receive relational and socio-emotional supports? What challenges or facilitates the permanence of these ties? This study attempts to contribute to a deeper understanding of socio-emotional support needed by youth and young adults with histories of foster care placement.

Ambiguous Loss and the Formation of Relational Connections in Foster Care

> *Don't stay away from your homeland more than three months or you'll*
> *never again know where home is. (Boss, 1999, p. 2)*

This quote is attributed by Pauline Boss to her father, an immigrant from Switzerland. It is the warning he offered to immigrants of how quickly physical disconnections from one's home become permanent and, consequently, the pace at which one's psychological sense of having a home can erode solely because of physical separation. It is also a statement typical of someone who has experienced an ambiguous loss: the feeling that something is simultaneously present and absent, and the confusion that can arise about one's own identity in relationship to such a loss. How does one maintain a sense of permanent connection to something when, either psychologically or physically, its presence in our lives is only partial or fragmented?

Ambiguous losses are defined as those for which there are no clear boundaries, no clear ending, and often no societally recognized mechanisms or rituals for grieving or acknowledging what has been lost (Boss, 1999, 2004). There are two primary types of ambiguous loss proposed within this framework. In Type I, a person can be physically absent but psychologically present, as in the case of someone who is lost in war or a child who has been abducted and is missing. In the second category, a person is psychologically absent but physically present. Type II losses are experienced, for example, by families with a member who is in a coma or is suffering from Alzheimer's disease. The examination and testing of this theory through research has occurred over 35 years in a range of situations (Boss, 2004), more recently including families coping with members suffering from dementia (Dupuis, 2002), the experience of adoption (Fravel, McRoy, & Grotevant, 2000), and divorce (Afifi & Keith, 2004). With one exception (see Lee & Whiting, 2007), the idea of ambiguous loss has not been used to understand the experience of being in foster care. This section briefly introduces ambiguous loss to later explore the findings of this study and the development of relational permanence among those with foster care histories in the context of chronic ambiguous losses of both types. Figure 1 illustrates the distinctions between these two types of loss further and introduces foster care under the category "crossover," the ongoing experience of both types of loss.

Figure 1. Foster Care as Ambiguous Crossover Loss

Type I	Type II	Crossover
Physically Absent Psychologically Present	Physically Present Psychologically Absent	Re-occurring Ambiguities of Both Type I and II
■ Immigration/migration ■ Adoption ■ Divorce	■ Alzheimer's disease ■ Chronic mental illness ■ Coma ■ Addictions	■ Foster care

The central premise of ambiguous loss is that we live in a world that holds up personal mastery and control as ideals. Particularly in the United States, societal narratives of personal mastery (e.g., rugged individualism and self-reliance) and personal control over most aspects of one's daily life are typically viewed both societally and clinically as ideal and healthy (Boss, 1999, 2004). Even when uncontrollable losses occur, as in the case of death, we have socially and culturally prescribed norms and rituals that guide mourning and grieving the loss, ultimately moving toward an emotional state called "closure." Achieving closure is thought of as a return to a sense of order, clarity, and control; it in fact marks an assumed end to one's experience of the loss. Sometimes, however, individuals are faced with losses that involve less clarity, certainty, or finality (see Figure 1). Coping with this type of loss typically leaves individuals or family systems to find their own "way out," either because society does not recognize the loss, lacks rituals to grieve the loss, or there is no end to the uncertainty and, therefore, no hope for true closure (Boss, 1999).[3] Research on persons coping with ambiguous loss suggests that

…ambiguous losses are the most traumatic losses to suffer because there is no clear resolution.

this lack of resolution can produce high levels of anxiety. This is exacerbated by societal norms and theories of grief that idealize closure to the grieving process (Eakes & Burke, 1999) and the return to a sense of order and mastery over one's life and one's emotions (Boss, 2004). It is assumed that ambiguous losses are the most traumatic losses to suffer because there is no clear resolution. Symptoms similar to those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder have been found among those suffering from ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999, 2004).

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3 Boss (2004) believes closure is a myth inherent among cultures and theories that value mastery and control. Instead, it is increasingly understood that experiencing and learning to cope with a close interpersonal loss through death is a lifetime, and therefore, unending, process (Eakes & Burke, 1999).

This report in part provides testimony for the relational consequences of many forms of ambiguous loss embedded within the foster care experience. First, removal from one's biological parents and family system can be viewed as an ambiguous loss. It raises lifetime questions for children about their permanent membership in their family systems of origin, and the degree to which they can ever become "real" members in their foster family systems. Lee and Whiting (2007) note that the reasons why children are typically removed from parental care are inherently tied to preexisting conditions of ambiguous loss. Many biological parents of youth in foster care were not consistently psychologically or physically present for their children, and this loss of varying degrees of parental presence can continue beyond their stays in foster care (Samuels & Pryce, under review). Even after children are removed physically from their homes, including in the extreme case where there is no contact, the biological family system remains a psychological presence. Impermanence marks their relationships with adults, caregivers, and familial memberships (Lee & Whiting, 2007). Young people who remain in foster care and never are returned home or adopted experience ambiguity surrounding their family memberships and the boundaries of the families they construct for themselves. The trend to place youth in relative care or kinship care can further blur familial roles and boundaries (Lee & Whiting, 2007). In this study, participants rarely noted ongoing contact with all of their foster parents or group home staff after aging out of care. The physical separation of young people from these relationships or family systems can add another layer of ambiguous loss, for which few receive emotional support. Finally, aging out of foster care—the revocation of one's status as "foster child" and the structure within which various services and levels of support have been received—is an ambiguous loss. Using this theoretical lens helps to contextualize the statements of young adults with histories of foster care on relational permanence in a broader shared relational history and developmental experience.

METHOD

Twenty-nine young people were interviewed who had exited foster care placement and were currently enrolled as Opportunity Passport™ participants at four sites in the United States. The sites were chosen using two criteria. First, each represents one major region of the United States (i.e., South, Midwest, West Coast, East Coast). Second, sites were also selected to represent varying lengths of time in operation. Therefore, during the study design year (2006), two sites were operating for at least 3 years, a third for the past 2 years, and the fourth site was in its first year of implementation.

The design of this study was partially informed by the Opportunity Passport™ Cross-Site Report (2006), which indicated that young people who were older and had exited foster care had fewer connections to supports. We initially proposed to sample only slightly more young people who were out of care and who were Opportunity Passport™ participants for a longer period of time. However, it became exceedingly difficult to receive internal review board approval from each state and county administrator to recruit the smaller sample of minor youth still in state custody. This would have involved additional review board approvals through state and county administrators, as well as tracking, locating, and gaining consent from the biological parents and legal guardians of all potential participants in the study. Ultimately, all parties involved in the administration and execution of the study agreed that the sample would include only young people who were no longer in care. Although this is a change from the original plan, according to existing research and the 2006 Opportunity Passport™ report, the participants in this study constitute the population most vulnerable to experiencing disconnected relationships and support networks. This study's ability to explore the experiences among a larger sample of this group is certainly not a limitation.

Sample and Recruitment

Four sites were involved in this study. All necessary approvals were received from both the University of Chicago's Human Subjects Internal Review Board and the review board of one participating county that requested an additional review. Invitational and informational letters were then mailed out to random selections of young people who were no longer in state care. This process was continued until approximately ten participants were located at a site and had agreed to be interviewed. Some grantees and site staff assisted in the recruitment of participants by handing out additional invitational letters and explaining the study to the young people if they had questions. Sites were also helpful in suggesting appropriate locations for an interview in cases where participants requested not to be interviewed in their homes. Once a group of participants had been recruited from a site, arrangements for the interview were made with participants to occur within a period of 3 to 4 days. Visits for interviewing were arranged to span across a weekend to accommodate the work, school, and childcare schedules of participants.

This was a difficult population to recruit. Added challenges included the prohibition against Opportunity Passport™ sites knowing the identities of target participants, which then constrained their assistance in actively recruiting participants. Distance also limited the interviewer's use of more traditional methods of recruitment with hard-to-reach populations (e.g., door-to-door searches for participants). To compensate for these challenges, the interviewer made arrangements to interview participants during times when sites were also having conferences or major events; upon arriving at the site, the interviewer searched for those who had agreed to participate but did not keep their originally scheduled appointments, and offered late-evening, early-morning, and weekend time slots for flexibility. All participants signed consent forms and received an explanation of the purpose of the interview. Respondents received $100 for participating in this study. Half of this payment was offered in the form of a gift card, and the remaining $50 was deposited by Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative administrative staff in participants' Opportunity Passport™ matched savings account. We were able to recruit and interview a total of twenty-nine participants.[4]

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4 One participant was unable to complete the full interview, but did complete the network map. The interviewer attempted to schedule a phone interview to complete the interview. After three attempts while on site and more than twenty unsuccessful follow-up calls to schedule a phone interview, we accepted this pattern as a "passive refusal" to complete the interview. The participant was still paid the full amount for her interview.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in a place that the participants chose. Most interviews were held at public locations (e.g., a coffeehouse) or in the participants' homes. All interviews were audiotaped. Interviews involved two related but distinct techniques: in-depth interviewing and personal network diagrams. As part of the in-depth interview, participants constructed a *network diagram* (Antonucci, 1986). This technique is used in clinical practice and among social support scholars to map and explore a person's social support network (McCarty, et al., 2007). The network diagrams were used to both collect and organize specific information about each participant's social support system as well as to guide the interview process— gleaning the details of the relationships and the types of support provided.

All interviews began with the interviewer making a statement about the many different ways one can be supported in life. Participants were informed that the goal of the interview was to explore their *own* definitions of support, closeness, and family, and to learn more about the relationships they currently have and do not have with adults (and others) who provide support to them. The interviewer then gave each participant a blank copy of a network map, which appears as a series of concentric circles (see Appendix A). Each participant was asked to choose a pseudonym (explained as a "fake name") and to write that name in the inner circle of the diagram. Their self-chosen pseudonyms are used in this report. Then the diagram was explained following an expanded version of the hierarchical mapping technique (Antonucci, 1986). Briefly, the hierarchical mapping technique is a framework using three concentric circles to represent different levels of relational importance. Together, they represent a person's personal network. Participants are told that each layer represents important people who provide supports and toward whom they feel varied levels of closeness, as follows (Antonucci, 1986, p. 11):

■ Inner circle: "Those people to whom you feel so close that it is hard to imagine life without them."

■ Middle circle: "People to whom you may not feel quite that close but who are still important to you."

■ Outer circle: "People whom you haven't already mentioned, but who are close enough and important enough in your life that they should be placed in your personal network."

Participants were allowed to place as many or as few people in the circle as they wished. Adding or removing names as the interview progressed was also permitted. As will be described later, some participants chose to leave some circles blank. Finally, participants were also allowed to place names outside of the concentric circle or to make notes to explain a person's placement inside the network map. All of these changes or adaptations of the network map were important in personalizing the map and interview, and served as important information for analysis in learning about the nature of relationships and networks among those in this study.

Once the diagram was completed, the interviewer returned to in-depth interviewing techniques, using the diagram as a guide to explore the participant's unique set of supports systematically across four dimensions: Who are these network members? How emotionally connected does the young person feel to each? What is the nature and reciprocity of the supports? What are expectations about the longevity of each relationship? Participants were also asked to consider relationships and supports that they felt were missing and how these relationships could be helpful as they become adults. They also were asked about "foster youth in general" and the types of supports and relationships many youth and young adults who share this background might need. Participants were asked to define family, closeness, and feeling supported, and to name persons who served in these roles. In recognition of the temporal nature of relationships, the interview included probing about changes in their support network in the past and changes they anticipated or expected in the future. Because we were particularly interested in understanding permanency, we asked participants if they knew what this policy term meant, their opinions about permanency, how involved they were in their own case plans, and their feelings about adoption, especially for older youth in foster care. Finally, participants were asked to share their wisdom about improving the child welfare system, supports for relationship building, and the role of professionals, informal adults, peers, and family in providing necessary supports.

Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and downloaded into a qualitative data management computer program called NVivo. NVivo was used in this project to store, code, and analyze the transcribed data. Data from the network maps were consolidated through content analysis methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to indicate descriptive information and general patterns of sources of support across the concentric circles and numbers of supports within each circle (see Table 1). The coding process for the interview data initially made use of both open coding and thematic coding techniques, which produced the final coding structure used to organize the data from all interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The analysis of interview data followed a Grounded Theory Method approach, using what is called *constant comparison* (Schatzman, 1991). This method is used to verify and substantiate the more conceptual findings by checking each theme against the raw data—in this case, interviews and network maps. A Grounded Theory approach to analysis was chosen because the purpose of this project is to gain youth and young adult perspectives on adult relationships that provide social support over time, or in other words, to articulate the participants' theories of relational permanence. The method is well suited for this project because it provides an analytic process that produces conceptualizations about an experience (e.g., relational permanence among young adults with histories of foster care) grounded in the perspectives of those who are living that experience.

…during the interview, participants discussed their family of origin and foster care histories, provided definitions of family permanence and closeness, and offered their opinions about what challenges or facilitates the development of supportive, long-term relationships.

Initially, analysis of the data (i.e., the names listed) on each respondent's map was combined to produce descriptive findings about who participants included on their maps and the number of supportive relationships mentioned overall. Particular attention was also given to distinguishing between adults and peers as well as between relative/kin and nonrelatives and professionals. Next, multiple readings of the interviews were conducted to understand the details of the relationships and supports reported on the maps. This included exploring their answers to other interview questions that could provide context for understanding their network maps. For example, during the interview, participants discussed their family of origin and foster care histories, provided definitions of family permanence and closeness, and offered their opinions about what challenges or facilitates the development of supportive, long-term relationships. Respondents were also asked about the length of these relationships and their exchange of supports over time. Through these multiple

readings of the interviews, codes were developed and refined to label sections of interview text (e.g., barriers to feeling close, expectations about relationship as lasting, professional as support person, providing mutual support). The final code list was then used to code all interviews. As coding progressed, however, there were aspects of the relational experiences that lay outside of the initially coded domains. For example, participants talked about why they were (and were not) in relationships with certain people on their network maps in ways that exposed feelings of obligation rather than of being supported or being emotionally close. Also, people listed within the inner circles occasionally served dual or multiple roles for respondents. Because participants were asked to write each network member in terms of his or her relationship/role (as opposed to his/her name), respondents were able to document these multiple roles. For example, one participant considered a nonrelative adult within his inner circle to be both his mentor and his father. Another young adult explained how she considered her biological sister to really be her mother. These "dual-role" support persons were usually indicated by participants on their network maps as "sister/mother" or "mentor/dad."

The final phase of analysis, therefore, became understanding these multifaceted aspects of the relationships, what these networks provided and lacked, as well as how the young adults understood these relationships as enduring or changing across their life course. Consequently, the findings presented here go beyond solely describing their reports of important supports or the number of supportive relationships they have. This report also explores key findings related to the many needs met by support network members, including (1) the distinctions participants make between the role of adult versus peer support, (2) the multiple roles and supports of inner-circle members, and (3) participants' understanding of what sustains or threatens the permanence of their most important relationships. Finally, this report introduces the concept of *familial* support, providing a sense of family connection, as an important type of support provided by some participants' inner-circle network members.

Study Limitations

This study has some limitations that bear noting. First, the study represents a small sample size. Targeting four sites further stretches this already small sample. Although the current sampling design attempts to recognize some existing diversity among grantees, the size of each subgroup across these categories will not allow broad or definitive generalizations. Despite this limitation, the study provides important new insights into the perspectives of some Opportunity Passport™ participants about the relationships they have, with whom they are in relationships, and the supports they receive and those they might be missing. These findings can be used not only to inform and enhance future outcome measures related to socio-emotional support among the larger population of Opportunity Passport™ participants, but also to deepen our insights into youth and young adult perspectives on relational permanence.

A second limitation is this study's inability to analyze the demographic and personal characteristics of participants that may shape their relational patterns (e.g., gender, culture, mental health). However, this report identifies some factors that may guide the design of future studies in exploring these relevant personal and socio-emotional factors in relational permanence.

This sample represents a specific subgroup of young adults who are aging out of care. The young people in this study are those who currently have access to a set of resources that provide support to older youth and young adults with foster care backgrounds. Moreover, these young people volunteered to participate in this study, and this may represent another layer of sample bias. In other words, readers should consider these findings most representative of youth and young adults who may be the most connected to formal services and whose support networks are supplemented by these types of supports.

Finally, as with any study that is rooted in a single perception, there are limitations in the data and information collected for analysis. Most notably, in a study about relationships and support networks, it is limiting to have data from only one of the members within a given relationship or network. Although important insights are presented in this report, future studies could employ a Case Study Method design to advantage a complex analysis. This would allow for the analysis of relational networks to include perspectives from those with whom participants have a relationship and toward whom they feel a sense of connection and support. Rather than for the purpose of verification or accuracy, having a range of perspectives and standpoints would help to gain a more complete understanding of a person's network of relationships and supports. The findings of this study, therefore, are the beginning of a conversation and not its definitive conclusion.

FINDINGS

A total of twenty-nine young people participated in the study; all were out of care at the time of the interview. The ages of participants ranged from 17 to 26 years old. However, most (*n* = 21) were between the ages of 19 and 23. Most respondents were single, four were married, one was engaged, and two young women were living with boyfriends. Eleven participants were parents of young children under age 6. The oldest parent, age 25, had an 11-year-old son. All parents had custody of their children at the time of the interview.[5]

Participants reported traumatic events prior to care, while in care, and upon exiting care. Of particular note, nine young people reported the deaths of parents/caregivers, close family members, and very close friends. Among five who noted the death of a biological parent or foster parent, one experienced the death of both parents; both foster parents of another participant had died. One participant's biological mother *and* foster mother died. Three additional participants experienced the death of grandparents, and one participant reported that his sister was killed while in her foster placement.

Table 1. Characteristics of Sample (*N* = 29)

Gender		Current Living Arrangement	
Female	20	Alone in apartment	14
Male	9	With spouse/partner	6
		With adult relative	6
Age		With foster parents	1
17	1	With adult support person	1
19–20	5	With siblings	1
21–23	18		
24–26	5	**Age at First Foster Care Placement**	
		1–3	3
Race/Ethnicity		4–6	4
African American	15	7–10	8
White	10	11–13	11
Latino(a) (Mexican American)	3	14–16	3
Multiracial[6]	1		
		Number of Placements	
		1–2	9
		3–6	15
		7–10	3
		11 or more	2

5 One participant had lost custody of her daughter when, as a foster child, she entered a juvenile deten-tion center. At that time, the baby's paternal family provided (through informal arrangements) temporary care for the baby. The baby was returned to the mother upon her exit from the detention center.

6 Puerto Rican/West Indian/Cherokee/Japanese

Most participants experienced a range of placement settings; however, a large sub-group had only been placed in nonrelative foster homes ($n = 13$). Five participants reported having been adopted; two of these adoptions dissolved before the young person reached age 17. In both cases, the adoptions were by family members. In a third case, a participant reported being adopted by his biological mother a number of years after his mother's rights had been terminated.

At the time of their interviews, many participants were living in an apartment alone ($n = 14$). A smaller subset was living with their spouse/significant other ($n = 6$) or with adult relatives ($n = 6$). One participant had been kicked out of her friend's apartment and was living in the basement of a nonrelative adult named in her network map.

Although this study did not collect systematic case history information, participants talked about familial and personal histories that continued to affect their current relationships with parents. A substantial number of participants ($n = 13$) noted chronic and enduring substance abuse and mental health issues among their biological parents. Among their biological mothers ($n = 11$), four participants reported chronic mental illness, six reported enduring substance abuse problems, and one participant noted her mother was challenged by both drug addiction and mental illness. Again, this study did not collect other data to substantiate these reports. However, surely children's perceptions of their parents as psychologically or physically impaired by drugs, alcohol, or mental illness are relevant to the context in which they maintain or reestablish relationships with their biological parents. Similarly, a small number of young people noted their own current drug use with friends ($n = 3$), drug/alcohol use of boyfriends ($n = 2$), or their own past drug/alcohol use ($n = 2$).

About Participants' Supportive Relationships

One of the central findings throughout this report is the way in which key concepts for the study (e.g., closeness, family, supportive relationship) at times overlap and at other times are quite distinct. Some of these distinctions are briefly introduced here. First, the people on each participant's network map are not necessarily the same as the members of their family system. Participants were asked during the interview how each defined family; however, not all "family members" appeared on the network map. Likewise, not all of the people on the network map were like family, despite being recognized as important and supportive people. Consequently, dentists, doctors, neighbors, and landlords were included in the network maps of some participants. These important distinctions are made here to remind readers that network map members sometimes include portions of a familial network but should not be assumed to illustrate whom participants consider as their family.

Second, participants sometimes included in their network maps persons with whom they were hoping for or had recently attempted reconciliation or reconnection. Despite physical absence of estranged siblings or the psychological absence of parents, sometimes these biological family members were still included in network maps. For example, a few young adults included brothers or sisters with whom they had not had contact in years, or added a biological mother during the interview with whom they were trying to reestablish a connection. These people were important even though participants noted them as largely absent from their daily lives. In this way, the network map operated as a recording of important relationships that existed in varying degrees as well as relationships for which young people held hopes. It also describes an aspect of relational permanence that involves various degrees of and shifts in a person's physical and psychological presence. This report is in part an illustration of how participants navigated their ambiguous losses over time to establish a level of familial connection and belonging.

A final, and related, nuance to highlight is a pattern around biological parents, specifically biological mothers, and their presence in respondents' inner circle. The network map instructions reserved the inner circle for "people you can't imagine life without." Most would assume that members listed here are those supportive people toward whom one also feels a strong and mutual emotional attachment. However, analysis of the interviews indicates familial obligation, and not necessarily a mutual emotional bond or provision of supports, often inspired choices to include biological parents. Indeed, this was true for half (4 of 8) of those who named their biological mothers within their inner circles. Familial obligation due to one's

shared biological connection, perhaps also interpreted as the enduring psychological presence of one's parent, was sometimes the reason they were included. For example, earlier in her interview, Justice notes distancing herself from her mom, who continues to cycle in and out of prison for charges related to her chronic drug addiction. Although Justice maintains contact with her mother, as she grows older, her earlier excitement and hope for her mom to be a part of her life have been challenged by ongoing absences at important events:

> *I graduated from the academy because I wanted to be a police officer. She didn't show up for that one. And the baby shower [she] didn't come. So that's kind of like when it starting going.... And when I had my baby, she was in jail.*

Yet to the question of why she still put her mother in her inner circle, Justice explains:

> *'Cause she is my* Mom. *She brought me into this world ... no matter what she will do I will never just completely turn my back on her. She is my Mom.... I love my family even if they don't love me.*

... young adults manage ambiguous loss and its emotional consequences through the inclusion and exclusion of network map members who can serve specific roles or provide unique supports.

At age 21, Tracey, whose mom struggles with schizophrenia, also indicates a sense of familial obligation to include her mom in her inner circle:

She does nothing for me. She is just my mother so that is why I put her there. We don't have no emotional ... no financial nothing.

To be sure, the young adults in this study have lived relationally complex lives. Interpretations of "feeling close" and the presence of individuals within the various concentric circles of their network maps must consider these relational nuances and ambiguities. Therefore, the presence of someone in a network map is not automatically interpreted to symbolize emotionally close relationships or even supportive relationships. Instead, through the in-depth interviews, one is able to glean the particulars of each relationship and better understand not just who young people named, or the supports they provided, but why these names appeared on the map and the levels of connection participants expressed feeling toward each member. The inclusion of people with whom they had lost contact and only recently reconnected, or who appear in their network maps out of obligation or hope, highlights the importance of understanding these subtleties within any person's relational network. Additionally, it illustrates how young adults manage ambiguous loss and its emotional consequences through the inclusion and exclusion of network map members who can serve specific roles or provide unique supports.

The following section will first introduce findings from the content analysis conducted on the network maps and describe who was included on the network maps, the types of support participants reported receiving, and the supports they noted as missing.

The following findings are highlighted in this section:

- Adults represent a substantial source of supports participants receive.
- Kin (those whom participants refer to as part of their family system) are more often reported as sources of support than nonkin within the innermost circles of support.
- Of those participants whose biological mothers were still living (n = 27), about half (n = 14) did not include their biological mothers anywhere on their network maps.
- Of those whose biological fathers were still living (n = 28), nineteen participants did not include their biological fathers anywhere on their network maps.

Findings related to the relational complexity of the networks are then organized as follows: (1) receiving support from adults versus peers, (2) child welfare professionals as support network members, (3) the meaning of permanence in the context of foster care, and (4) the search for familial support in early adulthood—navigating ambiguous loss.

Examining Network Membership Across the Concentric Circles

Inner Circle

When participants were asked to name those people whom they could not imagine their lives without (represented within the inner circle of the network map), they primarily named adult family members. As shown in Table 2, eighteen participants named an adult family member. Table 3 indicates that among those eighteen participants, a total of twenty-six adult family members were named. To a lesser degree (see Table 3), the young adults included peers ($n = 13$), siblings ($n = 15$), and significant others ($n = 12$). Nonkin adults (e.g., mentors, pastors, teachers) were the least likely to be named within this inner circle. However, for young people who placed professionals here ($n = 8$), those professionals represented important sources of support, often including familial supports. (This will be discussed in the section on professionals as support network members.) Also indicated in Table 3, inner-circle adult kin supports included foster parents ($n = 5$), but most often these were adults who were from participants' biological families of origin. Few young adults included their biological mothers ($n = 8$) or biological fathers ($n = 2$) within their inner-circle kin support network. All parents included their children in their inner circle. One young adult included God in her inner circle.

Table 2. Number of Participants Who Listed at Least One Source of Support

	Adults			Same-Age Peers		
Circle	Kin	Non-Kin	Professionals	Sibling	Peer/ Friend	Significant Others (Spouse)
Inner	18	4	8	16	12	8 (3)
Middle	15	7	11	10	13	4 (1)
Outer	7	4	11	4	9	0

Table 3. Number of Each Type of Support Listed within a Circle

Circle	Adults			Same-Age Peers		
	Kin (Foster)	Non-Kin	Professionals (Casey Staff)	Sibling (Foster)	Peer/ Friend	Significant Others (Spouse)
Inner	26 (5)	7	11 (0)	15 (1)	13	12 (3)
Middle	29 (6)	10	13 (5)	10	18	3 (1)
Outer	10 (2)	9	14 (6)	5 (2)	12	0

Middle Circle

Within the middle circle (those relationships that are important but not as close as the inner circle), adults named as supportive outnumber peers (Table 3). However, a later section will discuss how peers continue to offer essential and unique types of support often missing from their adult relational networks. Within this circle, there is also a very small increase of supports mentioned from nonkin adults (e.g., mentors), professionals, and peers. The most frequently cited support persons under the category "professional" were case managers ($n = 6$) or professionals tied to participants' current involvement in Opportunity Passport™ ($n = 5$). All participants had at least one person they considered as "family" as part of their middle circle of supports. In this circle, five young adults named their biological mothers, and four named their biological fathers.

Outer Circle

In the outer circle (those people who were not mentioned yet but are still an important part of the participants' lives), there is a decreased number of almost all relationship categories. In other words, participants tended to place their support network members closer to themselves. In fact, five respondents left this circle blank. Perhaps not surprisingly, there is an increase in the proportion of professionals within this layer of supports. Adults attached to participants' current involvement in Opportunity Passport™ ($n = 6$) represented the largest group of professionals within this category. In the outer circle, supports from adult relatives drop to approximately equal to the number of nonrelative adults mentioned as supports. However, as Table 2 indicates, almost twice as many young people name at least one relative as those who mentioned nonkin adult supports.

Exceptions and Notations in Network Maps

Although atypical, one participant began his interview by stating: "I don't trust nobody and that's why I don't have nobody in these." During the interview, he then placed names *outside* of the network map. Later in the interview, he also chose to add names inside the network map, including a foster mother who had kicked him out of her home when he was 10 years old. This foster mother was the only person he included in his inner circle. Others wrote notes in the margins about why someone was included or excluded. During the interview, three participants noted that a very close relationship was in conflict, and that this person was intentionally omitted from their maps. In this way, the network map also became the young person's tool to establish control over the boundaries of his or her relational ties. Later discussions will explore the "why" behind the network map relationships in ways that further illustrate this complexity, including how these young adults are truly in the midst of many transitions, both normative and unique to their foster care histories.

Adults were valued for their ability to offer sage advice, while peers and siblings served crucial roles as life companions…although professionals were typically mentioned in the outer ring of supports, a few young people named professionals in their inner-circle network, sometimes filling parental roles.

Finally, in sixteen network maps, twenty-one systems or organizations were listed as supportive. These often appeared written into the network map as "my whole family" or "my church." Among the systems and organizations noted, the most typical included family systems (*n* = 9), service systems and programs (*n* = 6), and religious organizations/churches (*n* = 3). This suggests the importance of social systems and organizations (as opposed to individual relationships) as additional sources or structures of support.

The remainder of the report presents the following findings. First, these young adults have support needs that directly relate to the ambiguous loss of their biological parent and associated family system—the loss of a "home." Not surprisingly, the most frequently named missing support was emotional support in dealing with these losses. Findings will be presented to illustrate the specific need not only for emotional support in dealing with familial loss, but also for support network members to fill these roles in their lives. This is introduced as *familial* support, and is provided by persons who are sometimes marked on the network maps in this dual role. Second, respondents made clear distinctions about the types of support adults could provide as opposed to peers. Adults were valued for their ability to offer sage advice, while peers and siblings served crucial roles

as life companions. Third, although professionals were typically mentioned in the outer ring of supports, a few young people named professionals in their inner-circle network, sometimes filling parental roles. Participants often worried, however, about the permanence of these relationships and noted previous losses as they anticipated the end of some relationships with supportive professionals. Ultimately, in exploring the question "How do youth define permanence?" this study finds young adults have both a technical understanding of this as a child welfare term, as well as an experiential sense of any individual relationship as enduring or not. In terms of their desire for membership in a permanent family system, young adults recalled the lasting psychological presence of their families of origin and their hopes to physically return to it someday as a barrier to being adopted. They also shared their perceptions of race, gender, and especially age as additional structural barriers to gaining permanent family membership through adoption. Taken together, individual relationships and familial memberships were seen as fluid and changing; some young adults specifically noted the poem "A Reason, a Season, or a Lifetime" (see page 67) to explain the impermanence of the relational world.

Receiving Support from Adults Versus Peers

> *You can vent to your peers, you can have fun with your peers, but as far as livelihood decisions, I don't consult my peers. Because (an adult is) the person who has wisdom and has been through certain things and they can let you know or help you to decide which road to take. You may not listen but at least they gave you a heads up. That is how I have been able to accomplish all the things I have, only because I had that support.   Sasha, age 23*

> *'Cause my momma she really the only person that's gon' be real with me no matter what. She gon' always tell me the truth.... I can always go to her for advice and get the honest truth.   Tiffany, age 19*

An important aim of this study was to explore participants' relationships with adults. Although participants maintain crucial supports with same-age peers and siblings (e.g., emotional, companionship), scholars continue to explore the unique role of adult support. Figure 2 shows that, across each circle, adults represent a substantial proportion of supports participants receive and that they consider to be important in their lives. In fact, across all three concentric circles, only the inner circle represents a balance between the proportions of adults and peers. This study clearly provides support for the role adults continue to play as important resources even into the early adult years.

FIGURE 2. NUMBER OF SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADULTS VERSUS PEERS
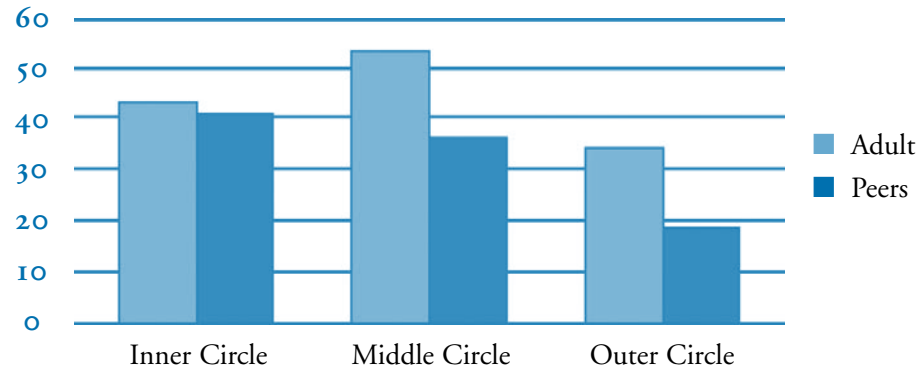
Three aspects of participants' support network members are introduced in this section. First, respondents make distinctions in the kinds of support adults can best offer. As in the quotes that open this section, young people want adults in their lives to offer *advice* based on life experience and to be truthful with them about the good and bad outcomes of their choices. Secondly, the people who participants mention in their support networks were typically met through their natural context and had been present in the participants' lives for more than 2 years. In some cases, young people identified *life companion* relationships that often did not involve adults but, instead, the peers or siblings in their network maps. Finally, although professionals and program support people primarily dominate the outer circle, when they appear in the inner circle, they serve in very important support roles. Special focus will be given to exploring this subgroup of respondents and relationships between participants and the professionals toward whom they feel close.

Valuing Advice Grounded in Life Experience and Wisdom

The findings of this project make clear that those who participated in this study value adults who offer supports as important across all three circles of their network maps. Advice emerged as one of the most frequently named and valued supports that adults were best positioned to provide. Given that many of the adults in the network maps were not always able to provide substantial amounts of financial assistance, most young people acknowledged the ability of the adults in their lives to share their wealth of life experience. For example, Jessica, age 23, whose support network includes both adults and peers, believes the adults in her network can offer important and valuable perspectives based on their life experiences that her same-age peers cannot:

Given that many of the adults in the network maps were not always able to provide substantial amounts of financial assistance, most young people acknowledged the ability of the adults in their lives to share their wealth of life experience.

> *I think the adults that are older, like my mom versus a friend. My mom really gives me the reality of it, whereas my friends are just like, "We* hope *that this'll be … with a positive outlook, we* hope *this will be like this." But, my mom … she says, "You know it could be positive if you did this or if you did that. But, you know, you're seeming to suffer with it—you see what can happen." It's just consequences. The same with my foster mom, too. She always tells me whether it [is] a good decision or bad decision.*

Condoleezza, age 21, named twenty-one supportive relationships with peers, adults, and her church in her network map. She also articulated a preference for her adult network members as an important source of advice based on their lived experiences. Here, she explains why she does not go to her best friend, whom she also places in her inner circle, for advice:

> *Well, I have a philosophy. For advice with a child I go to a mother, and she's not a mother. For advice with my man, I go to a married woman. So she's not married. That's how my mind programs for myself. So, that's why I don't wanna seem like … she's a bad person, but when I'm looking for advice I go to … people who [are]where I'm trying to get. Like for advice in my career I would try to talk to like some big people … because that's where I see myself.*

Becky, age 25, whose network map comprises mostly adults, echoes this preference for adults, particularly in seeking advice. However, she also begins to illustrate the role peers can play as nonjudgmental supports:

> *I think adults have more wisdom, but it depends on how they say it whether it's received or not. 'Cause, you know, you get someone that's got wisdom and you know, "Yeah, I have wisdom. Blah-blah-blah!" Then you have some that say,*

> *I'm the adult, I said so, and this is what you should do!" And then therefore, it goes in one ear and goes out the other, whether it was good advice or not.*

Some young people did note that age could play a role with regard to the relevance of the adult's advisory support based on life experience. This suggests a different advisory role for younger adults as opposed to older adults. At age 21, Jim currently lives with his grandmother and places her, his girlfriend, and his stepfather within his inner circle. Here, he explains the difference in experience and generation gaps that can affect how he perceives the advice he receives from adults:

> *I guess it depends 'cause some adults aren't as old. Some of them can give you advice that is in your time frame. People who are in their 20s and 30s and things haven't changed as much, and yeah you know I did this and it turned out this way. I can look up to that—you ain't that old and things are the same. You go to like your grandparents and stuff, like then it is like man you were back in the 60s when it was legal to drink and smoke marijuana and all this and that. I don't think your advice is going to help me out right now. Friends it depends, 'cause some of them have gone through it and some of them haven't gone through it. It depends on the situation.*

Toni is 24 years old and currently lives in her own apartment. She entered care at age 7; her interview describes growing up in seven different foster care placements as well as staying with her biological grandparents at various points in her childhood. She places her grandparents and her 2-year-old son as her only inner-circle supports. On adult support, Toni also cautions about age differences but frames it instead as one's ability for mutual understanding and one's "mind frame." Consequently, her statement warns against assuming that peers only offer a negative influence:

> *Sometimes a peer can provide a little bit more ... than an adult can because sometimes they are a bit more understanding of what that person is going through. A lot of times people take it, okay, if your peers are giving you advice it is negative. That is not necessarily true.... I don't think it is really about the age. I think it is about the mind frame and where you are at in your life.*

However, she ultimately places added value on the advice she can receive from older family members and support network members. Here, she talks about the importance of gleaning advice from her biological grandfather while he is still alive:

> *My grandfather is like really old-fashioned. I know it sounds crazy but he [offers me] conversation, just wisdom. He can't really do anything financially and I respect that because you have done your part. You have done more than your part because you didn't have me. I am trying to soak in everything he has to offer before I get that phone call that says he is no longer here. He is stuck in*

his decade and I am stuck in mine, so certain things I may see ... a certain way. We bump heads, don't get me wrong. But I still listen and I still take heed to what he is telling me. Because I will be 25 this year ... he has yet to tell me anything that hasn't come back to help me. So that is why I say that is my number one. If I got into something right now I wouldn't call anyone but him. Honestly ... he is my strongest point.

There are many different types of support and ways of offering support. Most young people agreed that adults, either ideally or in actuality, offer valuable advice. However, particularly within the inner circle, same-age peers (e.g., friends, siblings, spouses, coworkers) were mentioned nearly as often as adults (see Table 3). Although the focus of this report is primarily on the role of adults as supportive resources, this pattern was so pronounced that it is mentioned here. Beyond the specific type of support provided, this section highlights the importance of having support from someone whom participants knew over a long period of time. To know and understand someone across life's transitions were valued contributions of inner-circle members. Categorized as companion support, it is discussed at the close of this report as an aspect of relational permanence.

A Life Companion: Being Known and Understood

And we were best friends. I mean, she was the type of friend like, you know, we would go do something ... and be like, hey, we're in this together. That's a ... real friend to me.... I mean, she's close to where I could tell her everything ... you know, we have so many memories and so many pastimes that stay with us because they were real.   Shanelle, age 22

Particularly within the network maps' inner circles, siblings (n = 15), friends (n = 13), and significant others (n = 12) were important sources of support and sometimes were the most permanent and enduring relationships participants maintained across their lifetimes (Table 3). That someone shared their life experiences, *knew* it, and/or knew the young adult over time was an important quality of many inner-circle support members. In fact, with only one exception (a girlfriend), young adults had known all network map members for more than 2 years. Participants had most often known inner-circle members for at least 5 years, and twenty young adults named in their inner circle at least one person who had known them since birth. Best friends and siblings in particular were noted as being there over the years, providing important companionship support through shared memories and histories.

Condoleezza explains how her relationship with her best friend, whom she labels "best friend #1," continues to be important in part because they have a history of shared life events:

> Best friend #1 and I grew up together. We suffered so much trauma. We ended up in foster care together. Both of our biological fathers died when [we] were 10. Like every detail—every detail—[is the same].

Sharing a past and providing support over time were themes throughout participants' discussions of these relationships. In many cases, the emotional bond and allegiance this produced over time positioned many of these network members as the young adult's most important relationship. Angyl, age 22, includes her biological mother, stepfather, and fiancé in her inner-circle network map. But it is her best friend who she talks about in this way:

> She is just there. She is one of the greatest supports that I could have 'cause she has been through hell with me, she has been through foster care with me. She was … there when I first got put in foster care … she is there now. She was there when I was upset when my Mom had to have supervised visits with me. She has just been through everything with me.

For Jessica, this support comes from one of her sisters with whom she was placed in all three of her foster homes. At the time of their removal, Jessica was 10 years old and her sister was 2. Consequently, growing up together, an experience taken for granted among most sibling groups, is something she notes as a key aspect of their relationship's importance:

> We've always lived together [even] when I got out of foster care. Well actually, when I got into foster care, we were always paired together. My mom had seven kids. I was the oldest, she was like the fifth child. So, we were always together. Like through hard times we've always been there for each other. So, I can just say that she's really, really close to me because we've pretty much been through the same things. Our family issues may have, just with us being taken away, just going through the abuse … you know, just, just that impact…. Not having that father figure, that mother figure in our lives. We were kind of there for support for each other. Kind of like my wingman, you know, kind of just there. And so … I just thought that really really bolstered a strong relationship between me and my sister."

Jessica's use of the term *wingman* in referencing her sister's role is important. It distinguishes a type of companionship support provided in the context of hard times. In the dictionary, *wingman* is defined as a pilot who provides support behind the head pilot in a dangerous situation, typically war (Merriam-Webster, 2003).

It is also used more generally to reference an ideal culture among those in the military of mutual support and protection (Budd, 2007). Jessica's statement reminds us that some young people with foster care backgrounds must find these protective guides and mutual supports in relationships other than those with parents or adults. However, siblings and peers can also offer support by simply "being there." They can provide this important aspect of relational permanence through their shared history, because they have known the participant over a long period of time. This study highlights the importance ascribed to a relationship in which there is a shared history. This may be particularly important given the realities of foster care that threaten the ability of young people to maintain longstanding relationships with anyone (e.g., multiple placement moves, caseworker turnover, school changes). These relationships endured despite these challenges. As Jim simply states by explaining what makes his relationship with his brother so important, "just having a relationship with somebody that I had a relationship with as a kid."

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Respondents also clearly valued support from people who could appreciate the complexity of their histories and experiences. Consequently, it is not surprising that when these youth and young adults were asked who else could provide this type of deep understanding, most replied *only people who have been in foster care*. This section concludes with a series of statements from participants about the unique depth of understanding that they believed only came from other insiders. Though some call it "relating to" and others label it "understanding," across all interviews young people proclaimed the importance of having access to supports from other people with foster care backgrounds while growing up. Whether for advice, emotional support, or affirmation, the giver of support was as important as the type of support offered. These statements echo participants' earlier distinctions in valuing adult advice because of adults' increased life experience. Here, it is a specific experience that adds value to the support and ascribes important status to those whose childhoods are marked by a removal from one's biological parent(s). Consequently, this report recognizes this population as a community with a shared life experience replete with survival skills and insights that are important to share with younger generations of youth in foster care:

Only foster youth can tell you what it's like to have a caseworker, and plus have a lawyer, and deal with judges, and have foster parents, and deal with your regular parents. Only foster youth can tell you that. If you're used to having a regular mom and dad, then you can't relate to all that. You can think *you can relate to it. But it's not the same.   Becky, age 25*

I can relate to them (foster youth) more so than the workers. Because the workers have never been in foster care ... and the workers don't understand. So ... I want to become a social worker. That's what I'm going to school for ... trying *to get back to school for. I want to be the kind of worker I didn't have when I was in foster care.   Leroy, age 23*

And not all of them [social workers] understand what kids want or need because they haven't been through the system. I'm not sure the percent for social workers that have been through the system, but I'm guessing a lot of them haven't been in foster care or adopted or whatever. So, in essence, they're kind of ignorant in the fact that they don't really know what a kid wants or needs and they don't really know what's going on.... They don't really necessarily know certain signs that the kid might not be happy or something like that ... because they never experienced that.   Liam, age 17

People that have been through the system ... you have been there and you have done that, you know *how they are feeling. You can ... relate to them and you would know exactly how to help them, I think.   Monika, age 22*

Feeling that the adult doesn't understand what you have been through.... And when you are on the defensive it is kind of hard. Sometimes you feel like the world is against you. That can be hard when you feel like the adult just don't know. The adult is just saying things they feel an adult should be saying. It is like if you didn't been through it then how do you know? I think that is the thought that goes through a lot of kids' heads. You are not experiencing it, so how do you know?   Sasha, age 23

Child Welfare Professionals and Programs as Support Network Members

Participants agreed that, in general, professionals (especially social workers/ case managers) had a limited understanding of what being in foster care was like, and they believed this constrained the ability of professionals to provide meaningful supports to youth in foster care. However, as indicated in Figure 3, professionals make up a substantial proportion of the adults named across all circles of participants' networks. In this study, professionals included service providers attached to participants' child welfare backgrounds (e.g., social workers, therapists) as well as doctors, dentists, and educators. The majority of professionals named were those that participants had met during their foster care experiences and through their current involvement in programs or services targeting youth aging out of foster care. Professionals, however, were often relegated to the outer circle of supports where they represented the largest group of adults named as supportive (see Figure 3). Here, participants talked about the importance of their independent-living caseworker or a life skills coach as a resource for a range of supports (e.g., information, technical support, advice, advocacy). In all, eighteen young adults had at least one professional person named somewhere on their network maps, and four participants placed a child welfare program as the sole entry in their outer circles. This suggests that although service providers and professionals may not represent the typical inner-circle relationship, they can be an important part of a young adult's overall network of supports. Moreover, as professionals are part of the "natural" environment among all youth in foster care, it should not be surprising that they appear in varying degrees of importance on these network maps.

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What perhaps is more noteworthy are the six participants who did place professionals within their inner circles, five of whom named child welfare professionals. Here, particular attention is given to this subgroup of young adults, as well as the participants who discussed having close relationships with professionals in the past. Of particular concern is the experience of losing these relationships as young people aged out of care or moved away from a group home, or because a social worker left the job.

FIGURE 3. PERCENTAGE OF PROFESSIONALS, ADULT KIN, AND NONKIN ADULTS MAKING UP EACH CIRCLE
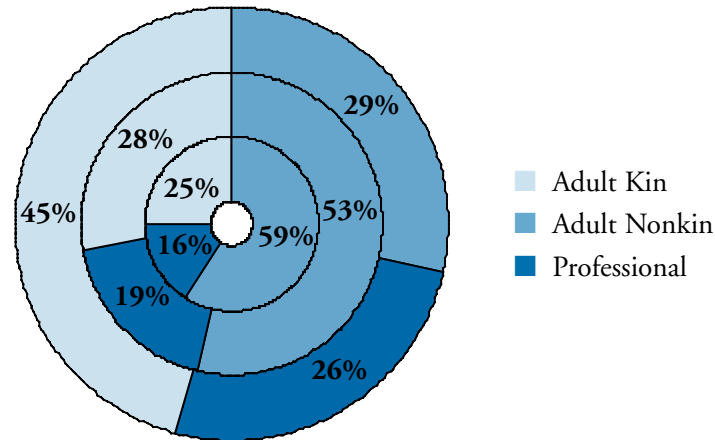
Prior researchers interviewing older youth in foster care have found that some youth think of the role of case manager/social worker as that of a "second parent," someone who should oversee a child's time in foster care (Courtney, Skyles, et al., 2005). Caseworkers have access to a child's familial history, knowledge about the child's siblings and adult family members, and power to control the family with whom the child will live. It is already well established that caseworker turnover rates are high (Strolin, McCarthy, & Caringi, 2007). Still, the symbolic role of caseworker and hope among young people in foster care that social workers can (or should) provide guidance and advocacy through a youth's time in foster care remain (Courtney, Skyles, et al., 2005). Consequently, when young people have a caseworker who shares a significant part of their foster care journey, the caseworker is sometimes viewed as similar to the wingman, or, as will be later introduced, in the dual role of parent. For young people in this study, this meant that a few professionals who were present during their earlier foster care years, or are key supports in their lives today, came to be viewed as "people whom you can't imagine your life without."

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However, this finding raises concerns tied to the stability of these sources of support and the realities of foster care as a time-limited status. As no one can stay in foster care forever, participants viewed both departures of caseworkers they had while in care and the anticipated loss of relationships with current service providers as quite painful. Here Bill, age 21, shares his feelings about his former social worker with whom he was very close. The interviewer asked Bill to share how he felt when his social worker left her

job during the same time that he was transitioning to a new foster home:

> Bill: *But it was only maybe 2, 3 months before I was moved from there [first placement], so she was there to help me throughout my whole time of being there.*
>
> Interviewer: *Do you still have contact with her?*
>
> Bill: *No.*
>
> Interviewer: *So how does that make you feel?*
>
> Bill: *Actually, it sucked. I cried a lot when she first left, when I was younger. Jus' because, I mean, it went from me being able to talk to her and she knew* everything *about my life,* everything *about my family, the good things, the bad things; she was very close with me. I guess you could say she took a lot of time in me, out of a lot of kids that she seen. Why, I don't know. I couldn't say why but I was really close with her. And it did hurt to see her leave. I had contact with her a little bit when she left … [but] not* really *at all … and as I aged out of the program, I just, I never seen her again. I don't know where she's at or anything like that but I respect her a lot, I never forget her. I would never forget her 'cause she taught me a lot of things too.*

Like Bill, others who discussed departures of social workers or case managers with whom they had bonded did not mention receiving any help in navigating these transitions. Children were, consequently, left to their own imaginations and emotional abilities to process why these losses occurred and how best to cope with them on their own. Thus, these relational disruptions go largely unnoticed as additional losses young people endure while in care. However, as Bill's statement makes clear, despite a physical absence, these relationships remain psychologically present.

Condoleezza is actively dealing with these issues tied to the impending loss of her independent living case manager. She is one of the six young adults who placed a case manager within her inner circle. Here she shares her reaction to learning that this caseworker had planned to leave but changed her mind and stayed. She interprets this as the caseworker's choice not to "give up on us":

> *She told us recently that she was gonna quit and, oh my God! I broke down so bad. I couldn't drive. I couldn't eat. My best friend [and I], we couldn't even focus. But she did just recently tell us that she's not gonna give up on us, and she's gonna stay.*

Later in the interview, when asked how permanent she feels the relationship is and whether she would continue a relationship even if her case manager leaves this job, Condoleezza discloses doubts about her ability to maintain this relationship as an inner-circle support, if at all:

> I wish I could say forever. But I think there's gonna get to a point where she just won't be there. Like (pause) *I see her* (pause) I don't know! I don't know! She's one of them long-life friends ... like, long-life people. But I don't think—I think that she'll move to the outer circle at some point, like to this circle at some point. You know what I'm saying? Like we're really close now, but with where she wanna go in life and where I'm headed in life, I don't think we're gonna end up as connected. Like, realistically speaking. So, I don't know.... I'm prepared for her to leave any minute now. It's hard. It hurts ... because it's like in care you don't have that many people to support you. And then when you have this person that's there to support you, the fact that they can leave you, it just.... It shields your heart all over again. So now that you say, "Oh, I'm staying." I'm thinking, "Hmmph! For how long now?" And that's just the type of shield that I have up now.

Soliel was another person who placed two caseworkers in her inner circle. She was able to maintain connections with both after leaving foster care. However, she is now losing contact with the one toward whom she feels closest because this adult has moved to another city. Soliel expresses her hopes for a type and level of support that is now at risk as this relationship grows distant:

> At first it was sad 'cause I always go to her for everything. I don't have like a family, I don't have somebody that knows me for a long, long time. It is probably [this caseworker]. She has known me longer than [another social worker named in the network map] so you know it is hard. I have a baby. I don't have that support.... I really don't have that support and I was hoping that she would be that support even though she is out of town. I was hoping that me and her would have that mother and daughter relationship and my daughter would have a relationship with her.

Some participants, however, recall exerting great effort to keep and hold on to the supportive professionals attached to their foster care experiences. Tiffany also places her past social worker as an inner-circle support and continues to be in contact with this adult support person. While Tiffany was in care, she was switched to a new social worker. Tiffany fought this switch and her new caseworker in order to preserve the relationship and connection she had to her original worker:

> They tried to switch caseworkers 'cause they said she had too many kids on her case. So I was like 16 when they did that. And I was like, y'all not gonna change my caseworker!!! And they said, "Tiffany, we gonna change your caseworker."

And they actually did. So I told the lady, "I'm like, I'm 'a act up until, you know, y'all gimme back!" And they eventually gave me back to [the original caseworker].… I was running away from placements. 'Cause you know when you run away from placements and stuff, you know, they have to contact that case-worker. If it's in the middle of the night, that caseworker's finna get out of bed, they gonna, you know, have to make out all kinds of reports and everything. *So … I put that lady [new caseworker] through it!* (Laughs.)

Tiffany's statement reminds us that these youth and young adults sometimes can use the power they do have to exert some control over their relationships. However, by definition, there is great ambiguity surrounding the relationships between young people and this group of adult supports. Outside of professional ethics guiding the boundaries of appropriate "client-worker" relationships, there are few rules that inform the relational nuances between young people and the professionals attached to their time in foster care. It is understandable how attachments could and would occur between social workers and the youth and young adults on their caseloads. For those whose caseworkers do not change frequently, these may be the most enduring relationships young people have with an adult while in the system. Not surprisingly, the young adults in this study who had what they described as "a good caseworker" shared the wish that these relationships were forever, but knew that most likely they would not last. This finding illustrates the existence of both real and anticipated ambiguous loss and how young people struggle and/or learn to navigate these relational ambiguities with the very members of their support network maps. Next, some of these issues are explored as a unique consequence of experiencing one's development, even partially, in the context of foster care.

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The Meaning of Permanence in the Context of Foster Care

By definition, "foster youth" are children who have been removed from their homes and, therefore, have lost the assumed normative context for a child's development: their parents and families of origin. If only in promising physical safety, the assumption is that a child's placement into foster care and his or her foster home is an improved developmental setting. There are hopes that these "new families," or homes, even if temporary, will provide what their biological parents could not or would not. There are also promises of one's return home or adoption (Kools, 1999) and vows to restore or re-create a family system to which one can belong forever. But for participants in this study, those promises have largely been broken. They were not returned home; and for some who were adopted, the adoptions ultimately failed. This is in addition to the broken promises these young people have already

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experienced with regard to social expectations about the role a parent should play in raising and protecting their children over a lifetime. The fact that biological parents were not consistently physically present in the lives of these young adults as children did not erase their psychological presence. Nor did it erase the need or desire for a parental figure. The following discussion describes how the realities attached to broken promises and ambiguous losses not only damage one's sense of confidence in personal agency to maintain close relationships but one's trust in any relationship's permanence. As Soleil noted of the loss of close relationships in her life,

Everybody that has been in my life they just disappear because some other party messes it up.

In this section, focus is on the participants' definitions and experiences of permanence, beginning with their perspectives on *permanency planning* as a child welfare policy term. This includes the degree to which they were involved in their own permanency planning as well as their opinions about adoption of older youth in foster care as one path for establishing permanent and supportive relational networks. Next, their use of specific strategies to navigate the loss of some familial relationships and identification of missing supports is explored. This discussion ultimately turns to an analysis of how these young people come to understand any relationship as lasting or not. The specific use of the poem "A Reason, a Season, or a Lifetime" (author unknown) among a small group of participants becomes a useful framework for working through the relational impermanence in their lives.

Untethered to the child welfare world, the word *permanent* means "lasting or remaining unchanged, indefinitely or intended to be so; not temporary…" (Pearsall, 2002). In the context of child welfare policy (e.g., the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997), permanence is attached to the guiding philosophies of child welfare practice recognizing the need for children to grow up in stable, lasting family systems. It is a sort of familial or relational permanence supported through a mandated process called permanency planning. This type of permanence is achieved through establishing goals to either return children home to their biological parents (reunification) or to create new family systems for children through adoption. As has already been discussed, this study population is a group of young adults for whom these ideal outcomes did not occur. They remained in foster care; some experienced the dissolution of their adoptions. This section explores these experiences of their permanency planning processes and illustrates how participants held on to their own plans even when they were not involved with, or informed about, the official case plans created by their social workers. At the time of the interviews, these were the plans many young adults were in the process of implementing on their own.

Analysis of interview data suggests that only thirteen young adults were familiar with *permanency planning* as a child welfare policy term. Eight participants responded "no" when asked if they knew what permanency planning was, and seven were confused about the term. For example, Angyl did not know how to answer the question: How would you explain a permanency plan, do you know what that is? Angyl replies, "Oh my God!" The interviewer then reassures her that this "isn't a quiz." Angyl responds, "Permanency is, is *(pause)* it's all good, I guess." Other participants stumbled over the question, guessing that it meant a personal life plan about their individual goals for success as human beings.

In cases where participants did not know how to define *permanency planning*, it was briefly explained to them. Most then acknowledged that they were familiar with this as a concept. However, as found in other studies (see Unrau, 2006), most participants reported that they were not involved in the development of their permanency plans (*n* = 15) or were not involved until very late stages of their foster care experience, before they aged out of their placements (*n* = 6). Although earlier sections make clear that some young adults had extremely positive relationships and experiences with caseworkers, during conversations with participants about permanency planning, most felt largely barred by social workers from discussions and plans related to their own futures. Here, Lorielle describes her experience

with one of her caseworkers and not knowing what was occurring at her own permanency plan reviews:

> *I knew absolutely nothing. I ... had a social worker for 15 years in child welfare and I didn't know. I knew who they were because they came in with a folder and they left with a smile. But I didn't know the purpose of a social worker ... or who she was until I was 16. So that was 10 years after I had one and ... I didn't know what her function was. I just knew she came in and talked to my household and left. So when I found out who she was and what she was supposed to be doing and her purpose, I made sure that she was actually being an advocate for me and not my placement.*

When Lorielle, who is now 21, thinks back on the times that her social worker came out to visit her while she was placed with her grandmother, she notes the failure of her social worker to establish a relationship with her. Lorielle felt that not only was she uninvolved in her permanency planning, but also suggests that the information collected to create her permanent planning was not thorough:

> *I swear to God all I remember is them coming to my grandmother's house, sitting us on the porch outside and she'd ask me how am I, look at me and say, "You need to be good!" And then she would leave. We wouldn't have a conversation more than five minutes. So it was never like, "Are you doing good in school, is there anything you need? Are all your needs being met? Are you being fed every day? Do you have enough clothes?" It was never anything like that. There was no saying, "Is there anything that you are not learning that you feel that you need to know before you leave the system? Do you feel like you can stay here after you are 18?" It was never any type of communication like that.*

Like Lorielle, a number of young adults indicated they were just now learning what permanency planning was through seminars or trainings in which they were currently involved. Thunder explains that he just learned about permanency planning in a seminar he attended in 2005:

> *We had a workshop all summer ... in it. Honestly, until 2005 was when I actually heard about permanency. I realized I wasn't a part of my permanency planning. Mine basically just happened.*

However, this did not mean that participants had lacked plans in their own minds about where they would want to be, or with whom they ultimately would live. In looking back at their earlier years in foster care, young adults disclosed their own hopes to return to biological parents, or just to escape foster care, as having their own plans for permanency. Here Joe says that even though he was not involved in his case planning, he still had desires about where he wanted to be placed:

Looking back on it … I was probably hoping to go back and live with my mom. That's what I was used to. Now I'm glad I didn't, but back then that was what I was probably hoping would happen. But nobody let me know anything that was going on. I had no idea if … whether I was going or staying.

Joe reminds us that young people's opinions about where they want to be placed can change over time. Joe's not knowing whether he was "going or staying" while acknowledging his hopes to go home further illustrates the lack of control many respondents had in planning for their own lives. Although in some cases it may be developmentally appropriate for the adults involved to make decisions, surely youth of any age should be informed and consulted about those plans.

Here Joanna answers the question, "When you hear people talk about permanency planning, do you know what that is?" Although she knew what permanency planning was, her statement underscores how young people have their own ideas and plans about their time in and after care. For Joanna, it meant remaining committed to her own survival and caring for herself until she aged out:

Yeah … I already had one [a permanency plan] for myself. In my head it was … taking care of myself and doing the things that I needed to do to get me by … keep going.

During discussions about permanency planning, participants were asked if they ever wanted to be adopted; they shared their feelings about adoption in general. Most participants reported they had not wanted to be adopted (*n* = 20) and looking back did not think there was ever a time when they did want to be adopted (*n* = 18). Overall, participants had negative or mixed feelings toward adoption as a viable option for them to find a family in which they would belong and feel a sense of home. As Toni notes,

I never even had a foster parent that I would say I wanted to live *with, not even* say *the rest of my life!*

Like Joanna, Toni's permanency plan was "to become 18 so I could leave y'all alone. Sign me out! Let me go!" Not surprisingly, participants' tendencies to have their own ideas and plans about their lives influenced their consideration of adoption as a viable path to familial permanence. In fact, hopes and plans to ultimately return home were one of the largest barriers to their interest in being adopted. Here Nick explains the reason why he did not want to be adopted:

But my stepma … around dinnertime she asked me … if I ever thought about adoption or whatever. In my mind, it was always, my mom and dad are gonna get us back. *That's why I said no about adoption.*

However, it was not simply participants' desires to return home to their biological parents that lessened the appeal of adoption. They also feared that parents would interpret their desire to be adopted as betrayal. When young adults discussed feelings of attachment they continued to have toward their biological families and parents, adoption often represented a threat to these attachments and relationships. Scooby explains how some youth in foster care may feel when they are asked to consider adoption: "They could probably feel like they're betraying their biological family." Thunder echoes this in his explanation of plans he initially held on to for reunification:

> *Of course I wanted to go back to my grandma or my biological mom even though that wasn't a great place. At least it was a placement for me. But any foster kid, especially when they first enter, they are in unfamiliar surroundings—I don't know what you are going to do to me. At least at home if they are getting abused or if they are getting raped or anything, that is familiar surroundings and they are wanting to—they don't want to be disloyal to their family by going on to somebody else.*

Other participants felt adoption meant they would have to replace their "real" moms with "new" moms. In fact, some of these fears were confirmed by the ways in which adoption was introduced to participants as children by their social workers. Here Lorielle explains why she was against being adopted:

> *They told me when I was 5 or 6, "Do you want to get a new mom?" And that is what adoption meant. And because I had previously lived with my mother and I just didn't want to replace my mother ... I refused adoptions.*

… what young people want is the feeling and experience of closeness, love, and belonging that are typically assumed to come from close family connections. They do not, however, always link membership in a family system with guarantees that they will experience the emotional and familial connections they desire.

Participants were also skeptical about adoption as a guaranteed way to establish a permanent relationship in a family with parents, where one feels that they are loved and truly belong. Indeed, most participants in this study were found to desire parents and a supportive family network in their lives into their early adult years. However, analysis suggests that what young people want is the feeling and experience of closeness, love, and belonging that are typically assumed to come from close family connections. They do not, however, always link membership in a family system with guarantees that they will experience the emotional and familial connections they desire. In her interview, Joanna illustrates this distinction between belonging to someone through adoption or birth but not feeling like one belongs to a family system and is loved and cared for. Although she still desires a permanent connection with a mother and father, she does not trust that adoption is a reliable

path to achieve this. She also doubts that a piece of paper can mandate any adult to provide the level of caring and parental bond she ultimately seeks:

> *I didn't wanna be adopted because I knew that [it] wouldn't benefit me ... I definitely wanted the relationship. [But] to me being adopted doesn't necessarily mean you're gonna have a good relationship ... a wonderful relationship with somebody. It's just a paper that says you belong to someone. Just because you belong to someone doesn't mean they're gonna care for you. I belonged to my mother. She didn't care for me. So I mean ... what's on paper isn't what's important to me. But I did want a relationship where that bond was really strong, you know, a mother and father. Yeah, I* did *want that.*

Kelley also thinks of adoption as belonging *to* someone. Even though in foster care she is physically separated from her biological parents, she still wants to belong to them. As she explains why she did not want to be adopted, her worries that it would be impossible to belong to both families parallel the concerns of loyalty others voiced earlier. Kelley also makes clear that one can legally belong to someone but not feel a sense of belonging in return:

> *I didn't want to become theirs because once I am adopted I am* theirs. *My parents, I still want to be with them. I am not with them. But if I get adopted that is just different. I am the other people's. I am not my mom and dad's. They are going to be there always. But if I am adopted, I belong to these people now. It is not even like belonging—it is just like they* adopt *you. But if they are saying just because there is nothing different about being adopted, then why would you have someone be adopted then? Right? So that is why—you become theirs. And then once you get adopted, you can never be with your mom and dad again until you turn 18 or get an adult. I didn't want that.*

But Amber cautions that adoption is not a guarantee for relational permanence. Here, she challenges some who advocate adoptions for all older youth in foster care. Unlike foster placements that are expected to be temporary, adoptive placements are intended to be lasting. Her quote suggests that the termination of one's adoptive placement can be more emotionally traumatic than a disrupted foster care placement, particularly when it involves biological family members. Amber speaks from the experience of having a dissolved adoption after being placed with a biological aunt who was physically abusive:

> *They're saying that, um, oh, it needs to be more youth adopted as opposed to being in placements. No! All that means is this is just a permanent placement that may not work out. And it's supposed to be long-term. I was adopted. I was adopted for eight years and I still end up in a foster care system. That didn't matter. It didn't matter. I mean, it's good if you was in a placement and you grew so attached to this family that you didn't need to be bounced around. Then,*

> *yeah, go ahead with the adoption. But don't just adopt them when they little [to just adopt].*

Tracey was the other participant who experienced a dissolved adoption. Here Tracey recalls her experience of being adopted by her cousin. As discussed earlier, she experienced her adoption as a series of broken promises:

> *I had just turned 16 and the court gave me the option to get adopted or stay in foster care. My cousin was like, "Just go ahead and let me adopt you. We are going to have so much fun!" She made a lot of false promises. Like we were going to take a trip here and there. I was about to graduate ... I was promised a limo and a dress ... for my prom. I was promised money for school. None of that happened ... because she wanted to keep all the money for herself. There were a lot of programs we could have got into ... we could have been in if we weren't adopted. So I was kind of left out in the cold and that really made me really, really dislike her a lot. So much so that I don't even talk to her to this day.... I have nothing to say to that woman.*

Sometimes connections were made with foster parents in ways that led young adults to wonder if these relationships might be permanent or had the potential to last. Unfortunately, what participants in this study more commonly experienced were rejections through placement disruptions. Here Thunder, who shared his earlier desire to be adopted, discusses a foster parent's abandonment of him at a shelter. Thunder's statement is illustrative of his loss of this potentially permanent relationship:

> *But then you keep getting passed along, you feel rejected. I even had ... a foster home and I was in there for a good period of time and we had develop—I* thought *we had a real good relationship. He dropped me off at a shelter because he said he had a business meeting. He said he was going to come back and pick me up in like a couple of days, and I ain't seen him since then. That has been like a long time. That is over 12 years ago.*

In addition to the impermanence embedded in their relationships and their enduring hopes to return to biological families, other realities made adoption a less appealing option. One such reality was participants' knowledge about the ways in which age, gender, and race operate in the child welfare system. Nearly all participants agreed that being older ($n = 23$) was the primary barrier to being adopted. Participants also noted that being male ($n = 6$) and African American ($n = 15$) lowered one's chances of being considered adoptable. When some of these statuses were combined, participants believed the barriers were greater. As Leroy, who is Mexican American, states, "I think it's harder for an African American male to be placed than for any other [group]."

Among those participants who included race as a barrier to adoption, African Americans and occasionally Latinos were believed to be least attractive to the typical adopter. Stereotypes about African American children, particularly males, and racism were included among the explanations of why these barriers existed. Here, "T" who is an African American female, also suggests that the use of television to feature youth available for adoption provides an advantage not only to younger children, but specifically to White children, who may be viewed as more physically attractive:

> *If you're older nobody wants to adopt an older kid.... And I think by the time I wanted to be adopted I was 11 or 12. But nobody put me on channel 5 or 2. I think race plays a role too. The White kids look a lot prettier on TV with the little curly hairs and pigtails* (laughs). *But ... I don't know too many black kids that got adopted.*

One young adult felt her racial background affected her relationship with caseworkers and the effort put into her case. Here Becky, who identifies as multiracial, shared her belief that if she were White, her outcomes would have been very different:

> *Race probably played a lot in it. Because, I think … believe me, I think if I was White, a whole lot of things would be different.* (How?) *Um, just the way some of the caseworkers look at you, you know, another Black problem, another Black case. Oh, yeah, whatever. Another black write-off.*

Age preferences among adopters were understood by most in this study to adversely affect older youths' chances for adoption. Thunder went as far as using the analogy of adopting puppies to explain the appeal of young kids versus adolescents, saying they are easier to train:

> *It is like getting a puppy. If you get a puppy early, you can train it to do whatever you want. You can train them to have your name or whatever.*

Others basically agreed by suggesting older kids were set in their ways and that this was not what adopters wanted. Here Toni explains why she believes most adults are only interested in adopting younger kids or infants:

> *Because most people that adopt are not like, "Oh, I want to save a kid's life." No. Most people that adopt are saying, "I can't have kids." They want that baby. They want that child that they can raise and bring up in their way. In their aspect of life. You don't want to adopt a 16-year-old child that has been in five foster homes, been pregnant once. You don't want that.... I believe when a person is adopted, you want a child that hadn't really been distorted too much. You don't want no Jimmie that has been through A, B, and C.... You may be*

an adult that has never experienced it, so how can I guide you? I want you to fit into this plan in life that I came up with…. So if I get little Marcie that is 8 months old, I can raise Marcie to be whatever I want her to be until she gets old enough to go which way, but she will still be a part of what you taught her.

This perspective was shared by nearly all participants. Here Lorielle explains why teenagers are considered less desirable adoptees:

Teenagers are the toughest because they tend to be the ones with the most baggage. They are the ones that seem to fall through the cracks of the system. It is up to the adoptive parents to fix it. So it's taking 16 years of disaster—trying to crush in 2 years of success and that is a lot they would have to try to take on. So it is easier just to get a baby or get a child that is under 12 and to address tougher issues that they have there and raise them as their own. So then their culture and their values and morals are similar to yours.

Sometimes social workers informed these young people that their status as male or older lowered their chances of being placed with families who desired girls and younger children. Bill recalls:

My social worker talked about being placed with a family. But she explained to me at that age, and being a boy, a lot of foster families they look for either younger kids, or even if not younger kids, they tend more to adopt girls than guys. And being 14, 15, foster families aren't looking for a kid that they're gonna be able to keep for 2, 3 years and say, "Dang, now it's time for you to move out." So it was something I definitely wanted but at the same time, it was something … I really knew I was goin' home. They used to tell me, "It might be a long time before you go home." [But] I'd rather go to foster care.

Bill's explanation weaves together his knowledge of adopter preferences, his status as less attractive to these adopters, and his pledge to ultimately go home. This analysis suggests that given these shared understandings of adoption and of adopters, adoption is not always viewed as an attractive option for achieving relational permanence or a mutual family attachment. First, all of these young people are in at least one of the categories perceived as less desirable, being older, male, and/or African American. This makes the possibility of being adopted seem, to them, quite remote. There is little incentive to continue to desire something that appears very unlikely. Second, they view adoption as threatening their desires to preserve some level of connection to their biological families and parents. Indeed, adoption can be perceived as thwarting their enduring plans and hopes to someday return to their biological families. Moreover, in an attempt to not betray (or be perceived as betraying) their biological parents and family systems, adoption is often rejected. Third, legally "belonging" to someone else is believed neither to secure nor

cement one's familial membership nor to guarantee the provision of love, sense of belonging, or familial support. This doubt in the sacred permanence of any family system and its abilities to offer these supports is reinforced by having been removed from their own biological families, various degrees of rejection from biological and foster parents, the experience of multiple foster family placements, and in two cases, surviving dissolved adoptions. Consequently, an interpretation of their overwhelming response of "no" to questions about their desire to be adopted must recognize these realities. Simply put, many older youth or young adults may not see adoption as an attractive or realistic option for achieving relational permanence or a sense of home.

Again, this does not mean that participants did not seek lifetime connections with family members or desire parental figures. They did. However, at the time of their interviews, most young adults were struggling to reconnect or maintain relationships with biological family members, close friends, and supportive adults. They were attempting to carry out their own permanency plans and fulfill desires for family connections.

The Search for Familial Support in Early Adulthood: Navigating Ambiguous Loss

> *I know I didn't listen to my friends when it came to important decisions. It wasn't my friends that I turned to when I wanted someone to be there if I had a basketball game or if I got the honor roll. I am not looking for their appraisal— I am looking for my parents. And then if my parents aren't there, I am looking for somebody that can almost fit that bill. That is what happened I think with my sister. She became—I am looking at her for approval or appraisal because she is older and she carries herself in a mature way. So it was kind of hard for me not to look at her like that.   Sasha, age 23*

This final section will explore how respondents cope with the ambiguous, and at times complete, loss of their biological parents and family systems. It is fitting to close the discussion of support networks and the development of relational permanence here. It is in the context of this initial loss of secure membership within their biological nuclear families through entrance into foster care that many of their subsequent needs for support in adulthood arise. Three aspects are explored. First, young adults note a significant unmet need for emotional support in dealing with the complexities of their past relationships, primarily those with biological parents. Second, in the real and perceived absence of these supports,

this study underscores earlier work that indicates the use of "self-protective" (Kools, 1999) coping mechanisms among young people with foster care backgrounds. Two coping mechanisms that sometimes work at cross purposes will be explored here: (1) distancing behaviors and distrust of close bonds, and (2) the search for familial support by reestablishing connections with biological family and by ascribing dual roles to persons who have served these relational functions over time. Many of these dual-role figures were providing a level of support participants referred to as "everything." Third, at the time of the interviews, participants were in various stages of managing the permanence and quality of their relationships—moving people closer or further away from their inner-circle networks. The poem "A Reason, a Season, or a Lifetime" was offered by some as a useful way of drawing meaning from relationships even when they do not last or are less close than one hopes.

The Need for Emotional Support

The stories these young people shared about being in foster care are reminders that every placement *into* a foster home is intimately linked with the removal *from* a home. Although the very purpose of foster care is to ensure safe family systems for children, this study suggests that in the effort to protect, we are also producing a broader developmental context in which myriad ambiguous losses and traumas are inevitably embedded. This was not viewed as protective from the perspective of those involved in the study. Moreover, most participants felt that they were left on their own to cope with these experiences. Consequently, when asked to name the supports that were missing and the supports that youth in foster care need most, emotional support was most frequently named.

For example, at age 25 Becky is the mother of an 11-year-old daughter. She entered care at the age of 13. She describes wishing that her father would "come and get me out of this mess!" He never did, and instead suffered a long history of drug abuse. Also, while she was in care, her biological mother died as well as a foster mother with whom she was close. Although she is now growing closer to her father in his recovery, he does not provide the emotional support she needs. From these experiences, she explains the type of support she believes is essential for youth in foster care:

> *Being in the system they'll ... teach you how to go to work, they'll try to teach you how to go to school, how to do hygiene. But they don't never teach you how to really grow up and deal with what you've been through so you don't just crack up somewhere.*

Thunder shares this perspective and adds that the loss of one's biological parents is something that youth and young adults in foster care need help to cope with:

> We are going to need somebody to run to, we are going to need to run to some-body who is going to help us cope with different situations as far as our biological [parents] not being there. Me, personally I don't care now.

Condoleezza also believed that emotional support was crucial, in part because it serves as the foundation of one's daily life and ultimately, one's ability for good decision making. When asked to name the most important type of support youth and young adults in foster care need, she replied:

> I feel ... emotional support. Because if they have that emotional support, it vamps your whole life. You know? If you didn't have that emotional support, in return the outcomes are gonna be bad problems. Like you may have ... I don't know ... medium relationships ... you may end up getting a STD or just differ-ent things like that. Or you may end up getting pregnant and then you might not be going to college. So everything stems ... from emotional.

Although most participants did not equate emotional support with mental health services or the need for counseling, Tiffany's statement reminds us that sometimes young people may not make use of existing services (or relationships) that could offer this support. In answering questions about the types of supports missing from her network map, Tiffany states:

> I would like to still go to counseling. Back then ... I was going to counseling, I wasn't using it. I wasn't going in there being honest about everything. I'm older now ... and I don't have that ... I kinda wish that I would've dealt with a lot of stuff back then when I had the chance to.

Although this study was not designed to examine the outcome of missing supports on youth, throughout their stories there are hints of the ways in which not having emotional support in the past can affect their current life. Particularly when unresolved issues from one's past were unearthed in the context of current relationships, the need for emotional support endured. Here Joanna describes unresolved feelings tied to her past that were triggered by her recent involvement in an event for young adults with foster care backgrounds. Her coping mechanism of choice, putting up an emotional wall, is negatively affecting her marriage:

> I've been definitely thinking about my past.... Like for example, when I went to DC, you know, just people, former foster youths were naming ... saying some of the things that happened in their life and I've just been getting really emotional lately. I think that in a sense has affected my relationship with my husband because ... I guess since the beginning I haven't been able to give him my all.... I still have that wall kind of in between and it's definitely affected it.

Seeking Connection in the Context of Relational Distrust

The analysis presented here supports earlier work that has found that children and older youth in foster care develop a set of self-protective skills in the absence of real or perceived emotional support from others (Kools, 1999), and learn how to survive their time in care through self-reliance (Samuels & Pryce, under review). As Tiffany's quote suggests, these protective coping skills may not always facilitate the use of existing supports or the development and retention of close personal relationships through which emotional support could be provided.

As discussed in Kools (1999), one dimension of self-protection all participants noted was distrust and suspicion of others' intentions. This was viewed as the greatest barrier to forming relationships and feeling connected to others, ultimately causing some to pull away from relationships with both adults and peers. Leroy, who entered care at age 4, explains how broken promises by the courts and his caseworkers to reunify him with his biological mother planted these seeds of distrust. He is perhaps an extreme example in that he was the only person who initially left his entire network map empty:

…one dimension of self-protection all participants noted was distrust and suspicion of others' intentions. This was viewed as the greatest barrier to forming relationships and feeling connected to others, ultimately causing some to pull away from relationships with both adults and peers.

> *I had workers that would come and tell me, "Oh, you and your brother goin' home after court today" and this and that. And every time after that I'm wondering—Why I can't go home? Because … I was old enough to realize that I wasn't with my real mom anymore, and … that's all I wanted.… I would cry out for her. And every time, they would come and tell me, "Not this time but maybe next time." And the next time I'd be waiting. They kept telling me that. I began to not trust people, because I didn't want to be lied to anymore.*

Leroy is currently living with his biological mother and attempting to establish a connection. During his interview, he ultimately adds her outside of his network map. But he explains well the ambiguous loss of his biological family system through physical separation from them, and how this causes him to consider himself as someone who doesn't have a "real" family or home, while the wish for a home is psychologically ever-present. For Leroy, as for the others in this study, a "real" family was one that was consistently both psychologically and physically present:

> *To me, family is … okay, I'm 'a define friend for you and go from there. My definition of a friend is someone who is with you when the whole world has gone out. And to me, family would be even* more *than that; would be there with you*

regardless, for whatever. Even if you're wrong, they'll still ... go to bat for you and then *ask questions. But I have nobody like that. Y'know what I'm saying? I have people that are related to me by blood, but I don't even know them. I only know my mom. One of my little brothers, two of my sisters ... after that I don't know anybody. I don't know nobody else.... It used to make me very mad, when I was a kid, because I would see people with their moms or dads or cousins. Or anytime one my friends got into a fight or whatever, they'd be like, "I'm calling my cousin." But I couldn't say that. I didn't have any cousins, didn't have any family. I had people that took care of me, but that's all they were. They were paid to take care of me. I didn't have a* real *family. I never got to experience a family setting at all.*

Participants also noted experiencing losses that included and transcended their foster care experiences, and this provided added challenge to their willingness to get close to others. Bill, age 21, currently lives with his biological mother, who is dying of cancer. He has suffered a number of deaths (e.g., grandparents, friends), including that of a woman who once served in the role of a mother figure to him. He now is left feeling that he is on his own to deal with this, and he is coping by not making efforts to form close relationships in hopes of avoiding more loss and pain. When asked how foster care affects his relationships, he includes these experiences in his explanation:

It affects my ability to wanna latch on to somebody, because every time it seems like I've latched on to someone, I lose them. And not in a sense of latching on to 'em, but jus getting' close to 'em, like. All of them people that have died. My mom had a friend.... She was like a second mother to me for a while.... She had a lot of stress goin' on in her life. She thought pills was the answer to that. And she jus ... she happen to take too many and she died so....
Through the years of latching on to people, from adult figures, to even friends ... it's affected my ability to want to, for the fact that, every time I do, somethin' bad happens. And it really tears me apart every time it happens. I take it harder than I should. So, it really affects me, so it jus' feels like I haven't really been tryin' to latch close to people as much as, you know, one would. Jus' because of everyone that I've lost. I don't know how to deal with it. It's hard.

Most young adults talked about trust and self-distancing as a shared emotional state among those with foster care backgrounds. Learning how to "read people" or simply erecting "walls" to test a person's trustworthiness was a thread that ran through all of the interviews. Here, Thunder explains how his friend illustrated her coping mechanisms in managing issues of trust in close personal relationships.

> *Most young adults talked about trust and self-distancing as a shared emotional state among those with foster care backgrounds. Learning how to "read people" or simply erecting "walls" to test a person's trustworthiness was a thread that ran through all of the interviews.*

When asked what the number one barrier is among youth in foster care to forming permanent close relationships with people, he replies:

> *Trust! I tell you it is that wall. We build up that wall! I have done a workshop where we ask people to draw a house or whatever and draw the scenery and draw the people on the inside. A good friend of mine she drew a house. The house didn't have a door or garage door or anything. There were people on the outside and there were people on the inside.... We were sitting down and we asked her why the house doesn't have a door? She say it is like this: "The people on the inside of this house, they know how to get inside this house and that means that they belong there. The people on the outside of the house, they are still trying to figure out how to get inside this house. So once they make it inside this house they know that they are there."*

However, for many young people, it is *they* who seek entrance and belonging to a home. During our interviews, respondents were asked to define family and discuss their experiences of being in various family systems. Sometimes their definitions included literal mention of a home where one belonged, offering clear visuals of a welcoming family scene. Below, Amber's inclusion of being able to go into the refrigerator at will, however, suggests a level of familial belonging that some youth in foster care do not enjoy in their foster homes:

> *A family is a setting where it's a few people, that has a house, that you can always go to. The key up under the mat. You know, um, you know you can go in the fridge if you want. Yeah. And then you just, um, sit around and crack jokes and cook and eat (laughs).... A family is somebody you can just feel real comfortable and welcome, anywhere you go, no matter how you act no matter what you do, they* know *you, you know?*

Young adults consistently talked about foster care as threatening one's sense of family belonging and, consequently, adding to one's need to survive the time in foster care on one's own. Here Toni explains that her mistrust is of adults to whom she is not biologically related and their abilities to provide her love and a sense of home. In fact, she goes as far as pathologizing love from people with whom one is not biologically related:

> *In foster care you don't really have a sense of home. You don't really know when … if you are not with your parents … no one is really going to love you like a parent, I don't believe, unless there is something that is totally sick in their minds. [So] you have more a sense of survival. It is either you are going to survive or not … a lot more things are given to you raw.*

However, unlike Toni, most participants had very socially constructed ways of defining their families and believed that when one's biological parents were not

available or able to fill that role, others could be substituted. Like Sasha at the beginning of this section, sometimes participants turned to a sister who had always served in a motherly role, or added "dad" to an existing mentor relationship. These people sometimes appeared in their network maps as sister/mom or mentor/dad and frequently provided levels of support described as "everything." However, there were challenges inherent in this process of socially constructing one's family system, particularly in relationship to the parent role. This is partly because doing so depended on acknowledging that one's biological parent(s) have not, and may not ever, play an active role as a parent in one's life. Challenges are also present as young people, who may have high levels of interpersonal distrust, learn to accept or reject new parental figures. Few participants mentioned any emotional support in dealing with this process. Here, Thunder describes his feelings when he realized his biological mother and father's physical absence might be permanent. Although his earlier quote suggests he has resolved these emotional issues of physical parental absence (e.g., "I don't care anymore"), his closing statement here suggests an alternative interpretation of a frozen grief process (e.g., desensitization to the word *family*):

> *I know in the beginning it gets kind of shaky ... like a shaky ground because your family when you are young is your mother, your father, and all your biologicals. But when you see—at times, you don't expect for your biological mom or your biological dad to turn their backs on you and give you up. So that kind of throws you off. And so you are going from foster home to foster home. And people telling you that "I'm going to be your mom and so you are going to be here." And then a couple of weeks or a month longer, you are going on to the next person talking about* they *are going to be your home. So that kind of screws with your mind a little ... because you lose the* (pause) *you get desensitized to the word family.*

Universally, participants valued the ideal role of a family, and especially of parents, in the lives of youth in foster care. Families were recognized as a place where someone could belong, find unconditional love and acceptance, a place where one was known and where one could receive support whenever needed. Parents were viewed as people who were the head of this supportive family system and provided their guidance and protection. Yet participants' hopes and imaginings about families were not built on experience. Consequently, at the time of our interviews many young adults were actively pursuing familial connections with people with whom they hoped they could build these experiences in the future. For example, Jessica entered care at age 10. She was placed with her younger

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sister in three different nonrelative foster homes. Now, at age 23, she includes in her inner circle her biological mother, a few friends, and her biological sister. But she does not include her biological mother in her "family." Interestingly, when asked about what types of support a family should provide, Jessica emphasizes the importance of mother and father figures, ultimately acknowledging the ambiguous loss of her father who has been physically absent for most of her life. She ends by admitting that he has been a psychological presence and that she wants him as a physical presence and parent in her adult years:

> *I just think that as far as like kids that are aging out of foster care, I just think that [it's] really that father and mother figure that people really need in their lives. That kind of support. Things that give kids a foundation and make them feel loved. And I just think that it helps them to cope with like problems and stuff that's been happening as far as academically ... emotionally, are able to have a foundation and say, "My parents still do love me, and they're still, you know, are here for me and care for me." I mean, being really honest with this, I guess when you're thinking about it, I would say more the father figure. That's something I'm not going to have is to really have my dad in my life. Somebody that would be there for me. 'Cause you know, even though I have my grandpa, he still has other things he has to do. He's there to talk to me once a week and say, "Hello. This is how I'm doing." But, you know, I really want my dad back. That's something I always think about, other than anything else.*

Sometimes participants were able to establish these family connections. As they attempted to reestablish biological family ties, foster families occasionally interpreted this as a rejection. Here Kelly explains why her foster parents should have been happy for her and could have made this transition easier than they did:

> *Well when you get home you don't need to be going through hell. 'Cause you just got out and you want to be with your* real *family. And like when you are leaving, your foster parents should be glad that you are leaving and not, you know —when I moved back in with my mom, she [foster mom] was sad ... 'cause I lived with her so long. She liked me. I was like, "I will talk to you later —I am going* home.*" Even though I grew to know her and stuff. Probably* did *love her then. You know? But I wanted to be with my own family. I didn't want to be with you. I mean yeah thank you for letting me live here and all the stuff you did for me I appreciate. And of course like I said then I loved her because I lived with them. But now I want to be where I am supposed to be. It is not fair that your kids are here and we are not with ours. And now that my mom finally got sober, you shouldn't be mad that I am leaving. You should be glad for me!*

But unlike Kelly, most participants did not place their biological parents in the inner circle, and only a small number included them anywhere on the network

maps. Instead, a pattern was evident among some young adults who pulled siblings or other adults into their inner support circles, to represent their provision of not only important supports traditionally thought of in the literature (e.g., advice, financial, emotional), but also much-needed familial support. In other words, these dual-role people served as parents or as family members in addition to another role (e.g., teacher, mentor, friend). Consequently, in serving in the role of mother figure or father figure, they are offering familial support, the sense that one has a family or specifically a parental connection to *someone*.

Familial Support and Dual-Role Relationships

Familial support is defined here as the offering of a relationship that meets a person's need to feel connected to an individual or a group of people "like family." In the case of Sasha, whose words open this section, her biological parents are both deceased. She now sees her older sister in a mother role. Ascribing this role to her sister, however, does not supplant Sasha's continued need for her mother. Likewise, her quote begins to suggest potential challenges inherent in some dual-role relationships that provide familial support. One such challenge is that not all dual-role network members saw *themselves* in these dual roles. For example, here Soleil talks about one of the people in her inner circle whom she has over the years considered as a mother figure. As this person has moved on in her own life, and as Soleil has gotten older and become a mother, Soleil has noticed this adult pulling away. Soleil is realizing that not only might this dual-role support person play a smaller role in her life, but also that she does not wish to serve in the mother role she has been given:

> *She felt that I am grown, I have a daughter and my own family and stuff so she don't need to be in the midst of me. But I was telling her that you are supposed to be there for me. Like mothers don't change they will no matter how old they child gets. My daughter will change 'cause she is growing up. She is going to go out and do her own thing, but the mother is going to make sure that the child is okay. She be like,* "I am not your mother!" *It was kind of tough.*

Nemo places her husband and two children in her inner circle. She has a caseworker with whom she has remained close even after she aged out of foster care. This caseworker attended her graduation and her wedding. Though speaking broadly of youth in foster care, she echoes the concern about the impermanence of some dual-role people whose support and presence should not change even though a person grows older. Here she articulates the challenges facing youth and young adults in foster care who might look to their caseworkers or professionals to provide support beyond the time required of the job:

I think continuing checking in on them, you know, giving them support like that. Like not just saying, "Okay, you're out of foster care so see you later! Good luck!" Um, 'cause you know. I mean, if a child grows up in a, in a normal household, they're always gonna have that connection with mother and father. They're always gonna be able to say, "Mommy, you know, I need this, Daddy I need, you know." Not to say that [social workers] are supposed to stay with you for your whole life … but you know, if you need something you should feel like you have somebody *that you could call. I don't know, it's just … it's, it's hard because they're not ever gonna be your mother and father.*

Even when biological family members were given dual roles and these relationships were perceived as lifelong, as in the case of Sasha and her sister/mother, challenges then shifted to managing these relationships across both roles:

She plays more of a motherly role … I go to her really about everything. About when I have to make life decisions, things like that, she is the first person that I call. It is hard, she is my sister *but I look at her more like … a guardian. That can be conflicting at times. You forget that she is your sister and not your mother.*

Later in her interview, Sasha explains the conflict "that is my sister and *not* my mother" as meaning that at times she may be placing her sister in a role that is not fully appropriate or fair. Her earlier statement, "It was kind of hard for me not to look at her like that," further suggests an apologetic but uncontrolled urge to look at someone as a mother figure.

The fact that these young adults, in their early adult years, continue to desire mothering and fathering reinforces the notion that the importance of these roles endures far beyond childhood. This section closes with Condoleezza, who at age 21 articulates the importance of familial support as she struggles to have her mom in her life. Her mom has moved into the hotel across the street from Condoleezza's apartment. Her hope that her mom will love her and be a mom to her represents the essence of what can be gained through familial support. Her quote illustrates that familial support is not about the exchange of goods or services, but rather, just the presence of one's parent and the knowledge one has a parent's love:

She lives in a hotel across the street from me. I know I need a relationship with her. I want to have a relationship with my mom. I want my mom to genuinely love me. But, I don't see it, I put her in my network because … I know it's gonna sound strange—she support me but not knowingly. Like—Okay … I need to know that my mom is okay…. I need to have a relationship with her, but it's not like she's really … we don't…. Like … having her there *is good for me emotionally, but she's not doing everything she's supposed to do. I just … wanna have a relationship with my mom. Really … everything I do for* her *… is* me *doing*

something for her. *But in the interim she's supporting me but she don't know it. She's supporting me by being there because she never was there. And no person in their right mind—I resent her for not being [there], but like God say, you have to forgive, and I know that I need her because she's my mom, you know?... She's always saying, "Oh, you guys are grown now. It's time for me to do me." And I'm like, "When did you ever do us?" So, I would like for her to eventually realize that she have children, and to try to be a parent to us. She needs to get some stability in her life and, you know, try to be a mother to us.*

Of all the supports possible, familial support—knowing that one belongs and is loved in a stable and supportive relational network—is perhaps one of the most fundamental to the human experience (McGoldrick, 1996). Yet it is one that many participants into their early adulthoods are making great efforts to reconcile, achieve, or sustain. Condoleezza's struggle with her mom's physical presence but psychological (and emotional) absence was a shared experience among many attempting to return to their families of origin to find a home.

My "Everything"

Someone that helps you laugh, and then someone that helps you cry. If you have that person all in one, then you just hit the jackpot. You got somebody that you don't ever what to let go of.... If you find someone ... like that I would never take 'em for granted.   Shanelle, age 22

This section introduces a type of support for whom "yes" was the answer for all questions about each type of support. In short, the participants in this group perceived the person as offering (or willing to offer) a level of support they referred to as "everything." This made these inner-circle support people uniquely valuable. Although most participants lacked this level of support in a single relationship, a subset of nine young adults reported one of the network map supporters as providing "everything." Those named were a collection of primarily women,[7] four adults and six peers. All were considered "like family" and were perceived as permanent relationships. Thus, they are a special type of dual-role supporter in their provision of supports that include perceived stable access to familial support.

These relationships were ones in which participants would use words such as *backbone* or *spiritual advisor* to describe these network members. For example, Toni's earlier description of her grandfather as her "strongest point" and as a person who either does or would provide any category of support places her relationship with him in this group. Sasha's sister, who fills the dual role of sister/mother, was

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7 A boyfriend, a godfather, and one husband were also included.

also viewed as an "everything" supporter who would be there over her lifetime. Clearly, the support offered by these relationships transcends the offering or exchange of any single type of support—advice, companionship, or even the sole provision of emotional support. This suggests that these dyads have a relational depth not present between respondents and other network map members. Here, Lorielle describes a social worker who she had while she was in care, one with whom she continues a close relationship. When asked what types of support her social worker offers, she says, "Everything," and then goes on to explain:

> 'Cause she always has been my backbone since I met her and we developed a strong relationship. So whenever I had a problem, whether it is in a relationship or it's personal or educational, she always provides that parenting perspective and gives you the motivation to go on when you may not have it within yourself. And she does find the positive and the negative in every situation and makes sure that I am aware of it before I make any final decision.

Present in Lorielle's description of her social worker's support is the value of an adult's honest and wise advice, the presence of this adult as a parental figure, and the advantages of relational longevity. There is also an element of affirmation provided through the role of motivator. Taken together, this person offers a level of support Lorielle refers to as her "backbone."

Becky met her godparents through church. They became her godparents when her biological parents died. When asked what types of support they provide to her, she responds:

> Just about everything. They've given emotional support, they've been there for every good thing that's happened, they've been there for every bad thing that's happened, you know … they're also my pastors, so I see them every week. They're really good advisors, and also if I ever needed—whatever I need…. Like I had to go in the hospital for 3 months, and you know, I didn't really have that many to come see me 'cause all my family is in New York. So they would switch rounds and come up there to make sure that someone was coming up there to see me so I wouldn't like crack up while I was in there.

Other young adults in this group also talked about their "everything" network member as being present through difficult times. Similar to the important companionship support discussed earlier offered by peers and siblings, the long-term presence of a best friend in whom anything could be confided was an important asset. Here, Angyl references her best friend in this way:

> We talk about pretty much everything that goes on in my life. She is just there. She is one of the greatest supports that I could have 'cause she has been through hell with me, I am going to tell you right now.

Two participants mentioned the importance of their "everything" supporters as spiritual advisors. Like Becky, who receives this support from her godparents, Scooby includes this dimension as present in his relationship with his maternal aunt. During his interview, he refers to her as his "spiritual guide." Although Scooby's aunt now lives in a different city, his relationship with her is sustained by regular phone contact. He values her enduring presence as someone who not only provided parental support in the past but continues to provide spiritual and emotional support during his early adult years:

> *Well, she's a teacher to me and she's brought me up like when I was younger and stuff, she's taught me to be peaceful inside and like, I don't know, enjoy life and accept it.*

When participants felt like they had a relationship with someone where there were no limits to their support, no conditions placed on them, these relationships provided the unconditional supportive presence one might also receive from a parent. Yet, with only one exception (Scooby), none of the people named in this group actually were their legal parents—biological, adoptive, or foster. It is also important to underscore that most participants in this study (*n* = 20) did *not* have these important supporters in their lives.

A Reason, a Season, or a Lifetime:
Learning to Develop Relational Discernment

I see ... a point where I had to get to and I had to realize you have some people in your life for a reason, a season, or a lifetime.   Sasha, age 23

All participants had expectations, fears, and hopes about the permanence of their relationships. Thus far, this report has introduced the ways in which the permanence of a relationship can be affected by one's role as a caseworker, sibling, or biological parent. These stories make clear that societal expectations, provisions via policy, legal mandates, and biological ties, cannot ensure the preservation or the emotional depth of any relationship. This discussion closes by sharing participants' insights on discerning a relationship's closeness and their general understanding of permanence in relationships. Here, the use of the poem "A Reason, a Season, or a Lifetime" (author unknown) among a few participants is used as a framework for understanding relational impermanence in ways that can include even the closest of relationships. Participants answered the question, "How do you know when a relationship is close?" Through their responses, we begin to see the standards against which the value of their existing and future relationships are judged as close and as potentially permanent, or not.

Given their enduring sense that much in their interpersonal worlds has been out of their hands, it is not surprising that some young adults continued to view the course or direction of a relationship as something that was also largely beyond their control. In addition to the impermanence young adults attached to their relationships with caseworkers, friendships in particular were noted as unpredictable. Although a number of young adults reported extremely close friendships with peers (e.g., lifetime companions), overall, less confidence was expressed in the longevity of these relationships. Some of their experiences with friends may well be informed by their current status as very young adults. For example, three participants left the names of their best friends off of their network maps because they were angry and were "not speaking" to them. A few friendships were also challenged by participants' desires to move away from friends who only provided negative influences (e.g., drugs, gangs) or friends whose needs or problems were simply too overwhelming. The end of these friendships was viewed as reflective of their own positive growth and change. Despite these instances, however, some young adults questioned the survival of even their closest friendships. For example, despite placing her best friend as an inner-circle member who provided a level of support described as "everything," Angyl worries this

relationship may not always exist. In her words,

> I think I'm going to have to age away from her, too. Like maybe when I'm 25 or older.

When asked about some of his close friendships, Bill also explains how he and his best friend may drift apart as their lives take them in different directions:

> It's hard to tell, friends come and go, so you never know how long a friend's gonna be in your life. Hopefully, for a while because he's a real good friend, I'd hate to lose him as a friend. Until life takes him somewhere, until he starts a family or I start a family, I move outta state or he moves outta state, you know. So, I really can't put a time limit on it. I see him being in my life for a while.

It is not unexpected that this group of young adults would view the connections they have to others as especially vulnerable to external forces that risk the relationships' permanence. It is similarly not unexpected that participants sought meaning in these uncontrollable relational changes over their lifetimes. When asked to reflect on their experiences in foster care and feelings about the relationships they have had, a few participants referenced the poem, "A Reason, a Season, or a Lifetime" (author unknown). Although many participants did not reference this poem directly, it became an interesting framework to consider for understanding the close connections young adults seek to maintain (i.e., relationships for a lifetime) and their actual experience of less-permanent relationships (i.e., relationships for a reason or a season). It is also helpful for underscoring the fact that experiencing an intimate connection to someone does not ensure a relationship's permanence, nor does the end of a close relationship erase the impact or value it had in one's life. As such, it is a complement to coping with one's experience of an ambiguous loss.

"A reason, a season, or a lifetime" is an often-quoted phrase and the title of a poem. It is also a book title (e.g., Simpson, 2003, *Planning for a Reason a Season and a Lifetime*) and is the CD cover label for Kai Alece's album, "Reason, Season or Lifetime" (Alece, 2004). Entering this phrase on any search engine will reveal its popularity among bloggers and its currency in the Facebook and MySpace pages[8] of many young adults. It suggests the value of different types of relationships despite the length of time a person is present in another's life. In this way, it offers an alternative interpretation of relational loss by placing it in the context of what was gained. It separates the value of a relationship from its duration in our lives.

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8 MySpace and Facebook are social interactive websites where people can communicate with friends and others. A person's Facebook or MySpace can include pictures, poems, information, and ideas.

The poem follows:

A Reason, a Season, or a Lifetime

People come into your life for a reason, a season, or a lifetime.
When you figure out which one it is, you will know what to do.

When someone is in your life for a REASON, it is usually
to meet a need you have expressed. They have come to assist you
through a difficulty, to provide you with guidance and support,
to aid you physically, emotionally, or spiritually. They may seem
like a godsend, and they are! They are there for the reason
you need them to be.

Then, without any wrong doing on your part, or at an
inconvenient time, this person will say or do something
to bring the relationship to an end.
Sometimes they die. Sometimes they walk away.
Sometimes they act up and force you to take a stand.

What we must realize is that our need has been met,
our desire fulfilled, their work is done. The prayer you sent up
has been answered. And now it is time to move on.

When people come into your life for a SEASON, it is
because your turn has come to share, grow, or learn.
They bring you an experience of peace, or make you laugh.
They may teach you something you have never done.
They usually give you an unbelievable amount
of joy. Believe it! It is real! But, only for a season.

LIFETIME relationships teach you lifetime lessons; things
you must build upon in order to have a solid emotional
foundation. Your job is to accept the lesson, love the
person, and put what you have learned to use in all
other relationships and areas of your life. It is said that love is blind,
but friendship is clairvoyant.

Author unknown

It is not surprising that this poem would have appeal to some youth and young adults with foster care backgrounds. It has appeal to anyone who has lost an important relationship, or has been left confused or disillusioned by a relationship that has ended unexpectedly or sooner than one desires. Participants who used this framework almost always used it to reference relationships for a season or a reason, not a lifetime. Consequently, it seemed to provide a way of understanding a person's departure from their lives without contributing to existing feelings of abandonment or sadness. In some ways, this poem as a framework normalizes a certain level of instability and impermanence in the relational world.

Among the young adults who referenced this poem is Sasha, whose words open this section. She uses this framework to make meaning of the departures of important people in her life. For her, it offers an alternative to feeling she was intentionally abandoned:

> And you just, certain people come into your life to help you get to a certain point and they have to probably just leave you. Not to say that they want to abandon you, but they were only meant to bring you to this point so you can go out and fly on your own. That is what I accept.

Sometimes participants connected this poem to their religious beliefs. Here, Becky places this phrase in the context of her Christianity. Although she admits that it does not eliminate the sadness she feels when relationships end, it may soften her reaction:

> It's kind of cool because … God brings people in your life … sometimes just for that … small season. If it ends, then I won't feel—I'll feel bad … but it won't be too bad 'cause I'll understand.

In one case, this perspective inspired excitement about the potential value of meeting new people. Here, Jessica shares her use of this phrase as reflective of her views on relationships and the potential they have to provide something of value to her:

> You never know what other people have to offer you. I love meeting new people all the time. 'Cause you know they make such a … difference in your life, wheth- er they're here for a season or here for a lifetime … they're really here to give you something.

Condoleezza specifically noted the poem as a useful way for understanding why people she cares about leave. She begins by sharing how this poem offers a dose of reality in thinking about relationships as temporary:

Realistically … I'm thinking there's gonna come a point where, you know, people are in your life for a season, and the season is gonna be up one day.

But when asked if it helps or hurts to believe that her valued relationship with her mentor might only be there for a season, she responds:

It makes me feel bad and *good because I know that she won't leave my life before her work is done, which is to make me into the woman that I'm supposed to be and that I'm supposed to be growing into. You know?*

The poem's opening phrase, that one will "know what to do" once s/he figures out the purpose of the relationship, and its closure of "friendship is clairvoyant" are noteworthy. At the time of their interviews, participants were developing relational discernment and seeking "clairvoyance" to figure out where network members and nonmembers belonged in their lives and how to obtain the closeness in their relationships they continued to both desire and distrust. In fact, in answering questions about how she knew when a relationship was truly close, Condoleezza's response suggests she is in the process of developing these skills:

I asked God for the spirit of discernment, and I really feel like he's giving it to me…. It's like a vibe you get. You know when you know.

Other young adults agreed that they sensed when someone was close either by how the person behaved or how the participant felt when around that person. Their definitions of closeness are embedded in earlier discussions about distrust and honesty. In their view, feeling close is in essence the absence of distrust and insecurities. These definitions are briefly introduced here to illustrate the standards by which young adults are judging current and future relationships. The discussion will return to understanding the challenges of establishing close relationships that include those that can last a lifetime.

Angyl is someone who reports having a number of close relationships. Here she describes closeness in ways that reveal the importance of feeling safe to express her emotions and her sensitivity to lying:

Someone I can trust. Someone that won't lie to me … you can tell when a person is lying, it's in their face. I know when they are supporting me when they are honest … they don't lie … when I look like crap … or they don't say anything and let me cry.

Participants agreed that, in most instances, one would just "know" when a relationship was close. As Jim explains:

> *You have to see it to believe it. In a way you can kind of feel it.*

Toni concurs. Her statement also echoes Angyl's definition and underscores the value of nonjudgmental relationships in which one's guard can be let down:

> *You just know it. When you can sit ... and hold a conversation ... pretty much about anything. When you don't feel you have to hold anything back, or hide anything, or be ashamed of anything, that is how you know.*

Others believed that being close also meant one could find mutual emotional support and enduring commitment from someone. Here Lorielle offers her definition, which introduces the notion of effort (e.g., trying) as an important aspect of feeling someone is close:

> *Being close to someone means it is a two-way relationship.... There is commu-nication on both sides. Being close to someone means there is some type of emo-tional involvement ... if I shot myself you would actually care. Being close means that if I came into a problem you would try to help. You may not be able – [but] you are going to try in every way possible in any way that you can to help. I can't write you a check for a thousand dollars but I can write you one for twenty.*

In light of these definitions, how do youth and young adults form these connections in their relationships? Like many youth who age out of foster care, these young adults experienced more than one potential family and more than one potential parent. These shifts in relationships and familial memberships can contribute not only to network disruptions (Perry, 2006) but can create a sense that nothing is permanent. In fact, in experiencing placements that do not last, adoptions that dissolve, caseworkers who leave, and their own fractured biological family systems, young people learn how to quickly cycle through ending and beginning relationships. In other words, nearly all their relationships exist as seasons. This does not provide opportunities to build relational skills for sustaining close relationships over time, nor does it inspire interest in beginning relationships and risking the vulnerability often necessary in building mutually close connections. Despite participants' definitions and apparent ability to recognize closeness in a relationship, it is less clear that they are confident in their ability to create this closeness in the relationships they have or hope to develop. A related issue of concern is how one's simultaneous distrust of and desire for interpersonal closeness might not facilitate a relationship's survival beyond a season. Indeed, many of the young adults in this study discuss these challenges in their current approach to relationships as two different sides of a magnet—one side

that draws something near that can be quickly turned around to repel. As Condoleezza explains, "It is easy for me to get into relationships with adults, but it is just as easy to get out." She goes on to further articulate where this comes from:

> *The turmoil that I've went through has made me very needy. So, it's easy for me to build a relationship and keep the relationship. But, once I see any type of resentment or something—it's also … just as easy for me to … "X" the relationships out. So … I'm very open at first. And I think that neediness comes from not having someone growing up to really be there for you, or whatever. Me and my best friend was actually just talking about that with my relationships that I have, you know…. Like how, the neediness…. Like I tend to open up very easily, very fast, trying to please everybody. But … I get hurt really fast and I shield out…. And that's one of the things that you battle with when you're in care.*

Although Condoleezza thinks of herself as "open" because of the ease with which she can begin a relationship, the matching speed at which she terminates relationships and puts up her emotional "shield" has an equal (but opposite) effect on her relationships. Here Lorielle shares her approach to forming new relationships, suggesting a less-open stance with new acquaintances. Though she is attempting to make new friends and even commits her spring break to traveling with them, she engages in self-protective behaviors—outwardly rejecting the potential for a positive outcome. Consequently, she vows to not be disappointed and, therefore, says she will only expect to remain alone during this joint outing:

> *So for example next weekend I am supposed to go to Texas for spring break. The whole time I am thinking I am going to be by myself so then I don't have any expectations we are going to be together. We are going to go to this club, we are going to go to this bar, and we are going to do this. And then when none of it happens, I feel bad. So if I have low expectations, it is really hard for you to disappoint me. I don't wanna be anybody's burden (*laughing*). I'm not gonna beg to be a part of your life.*

Although it is quite probable that one would not choose group travel without some expectation of spending time with that group, Lorielle's statement makes clear that her relationships are entered into with great caution, described here as low expectations. However, her statement, "I'm not gonna beg to be a part of your life," suggests a simultaneous desire to feel wanted and invited into a relationship. Tracey has a similar response to forming relationships. In her statement, she discloses that sometimes she enters relationships for reasons that have little to do with developing an emotional connection or close attachment. In this way, she endorses a more fate-oriented stance toward close relationships as evolving "naturally" and not as something she would facilitate:

> *'Cause I just feel that some people that I will use them for a specific purpose with no intention of them becoming closer to me. But like I said if it happens it happens, but when it starts off I don't intend it like oh you are going to be my friend forever or you are going to be around for me forever. I don't do it like that. I just let things happen naturally.*

Tiffany also makes clear that she keeps her expectations for closeness and permanence very low:

> *I don't look for much outta people, put it that way. So if they're not giving it, you know, I'm not gonna be sad and say, "I wish auntie will act like this and do this." You know? I'm-a let it be what it is. I don't trust a lot of people. So, you know, it's kind of hard for people to get attached to me and get close to me. I don't wanna say I don't allow it, but that person has to be a very strong person.*

She goes on to explain:

> *It's always been people in and out and out my life. As long as I've been in foster care, you know, I get attached to these foster parents, and it's just they come and take you and … I mean, it's a lot of people that's been in and out my life.*

These statements mirror earlier discussions of the self-protective "wall" and the distrust and suspicion that undergird the interpersonal worlds of many of these young people. Readers may remember Tiffany's earlier disclosure about the need for emotional support and her wish that she would have used available counseling to deal with her past relational losses. Like Tiffany, some young adults continue to cope with their experiences of relational loss, both past and present, by controlling their hopes and expectations. For others, it meant being willing to quickly relinquish a connection. Many of these young adults approach their relationships in the context of these tensions between emotional self-protection and the enduring need for emotional connection to others.

But many continued to hope for lasting close relationships, a need that either remained unmet completely or existed in a relationship whose permanence was not trusted. Becky was among those who talked about how many young people battle often unmet hopes for someone to be there for a lifetime instead of a season. Like Lorielle, Becky believes one must learn when not to have these expectations. Here, she discusses this as essential when one turns to professionals for permanent supportive relationships:

> *You know, you always think that you make a relationship as an adult and you expect them to be there forever. But you know, when you make 'em in the program, then it's a possibility that they could leave. You know, they have lives, too.*

Like other participants who noted the inevitable impermanence of relationships with most professionals, Becky is learning to adjust her own expectations to match those realities. However, the majority of supportive relationships in both her middle and outer circles are still connected with programs and professionals. This suggests her network map may undergo substantial changes as she moves away from the programs and professionals associated with her foster care experience. She too notes a gradual shift in her ability to discern how close and permanent various relationships should be, including friendships with peers:

> I guess I'm learning more of where people belong. And where I used to be ... like, "You're my friend forever!" Now I'm more older and I'm like, you gotta stay out here for a while.

Though the poem "A Reason, a Season, or a Lifetime" may offer some solace about changes in one's relational world, it does not address how to cope with important types of relationships that are still missing in one's life (e.g., a mother or father figure). Nor does it offer direction for how to build lifetime relationships, or even seasonal ones that can meet needs that remain unmet. There are inherent challenges in this process for many youth and young adults with foster care backgrounds. First, their stories illustrate their ongoing desire for lifetime relationships with people toward whom they wish to feel or do feel close. Yet some of these people are not people with whom they can have lifetime relationships. One cannot remain a foster child forever. And as their words make clear, their awareness of the impermanence of most relationships with caseworkers—this intellectual knowing—does not prevent emotional attachments. On the other hand, those relationships that were viewed as forever were not necessarily meeting their needs for closeness. The placement of biological mothers in their inner circles out of familial obligation represents one example of this conundrum. The degree of relational complexity present in their lives cannot be overstated.

Most young adults we talked to are in the process of figuring out how to navigate these relationships. As discussed earlier, they seem to be receiving minimal support or instruction in how to do this. They may also be rejecting some of the supports available to them. Consequently, they are coping largely on their own. Yet the skills that may have served them well in offering emotional protection in the past may not help them to form relationships in their early adulthood that are both close and lasting. Despite the ease with which they *defined* what being close feels like, it is not so easy to form relationships that embody this level of connection. Only nine participants who refer to their supportive person as "everything" come close to experiencing the level or depth of closeness their definitions entail. Not all of

the relationships within this category were perceived as lasting. As in anyone's life, these young adults' relational worlds are not fixed but are in transition. This study cannot predict their relational futures. It is possible that as they continue to "figure out" where on their network maps and in their lives various people belong, some will also acquire the relational skills to facilitate the kinds of relationships that they desire—close relationships that endure beyond a season.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report finds participants do indeed have support networks and that adults offer important sources of support. Adult support typically came from adult kin, mostly biological relatives; professionals were the next-largest group of adults named. Adults were viewed as particularly valuable sources of support for advice grounded in life experience. Professionals who were present as a natural part of their foster care experiences appeared in network maps primarily as outer-circle supports. Still, some participants formed lasting relationships with their caseworkers that endured beyond their time in foster care. These adults were valued inner-circle relationships. In naming relationships participants believed were missing both in the past and present, connections to their biological parents or a surrogate mother or father figure were named as the most desired and important relationships. Thus, this study clearly provides support for the role adults can continue to play into the early adult years among this population.

In naming relationships participants believed were missing both in the past and present, connections to their biological parents or a surrogate mother or father figure were named as the most desired and important relationships.

This report is also a testimony of survival and lessons learned by those whose childhoods are marked by foster care. These young adults experienced the loss of growing up in what U.S. society sets as the normative context for human development: a stable nuclear family system. This family system is assumed to be a group of people with whom one feels safe, wanted, and loved, and experiences a sense of belonging (Bamba & Haight, 2006; McGoldrick, 1996). People with foster care backgrounds are certainly not the only population who experience less from their family systems and parents than what is hoped for by society. Likewise, not all moments of their childhoods were spent in foster care. Yet as children, their families were challenged to provide basic safety in ways that were judged serious enough to warrant their removal. In removal from these varying degrees of harm, however, they have also been removed from their only experience of home. In an ambiguous loss framework (Boss, 1999, 2007), this is not only a Type I ambiguous loss (physical absence, psychological presence) of one's biological parent(s) but also a Type I loss of one's home and sense of belonging. This loss may be further amplified by participants' experiences of multiple other "homes" that are physically present but not psychologically available to them in ways that they experience or interpret as real (i.e., a Type II loss). As they are removed from foster homes in which they sometimes form connections, they endure additional losses. In some ways, these young adults are experiencing a chronic state of what might be termed *psychological homelessness*. As stated earlier

in this report by Pauline Boss's uncle, when one experiences physical separation from one's home, one may never again "know where home is" (Boss, 1999, p. 2). These layered and crossover experiences of ambiguous loss seemed to interact in ways that resulted in a frozen grief process—the inability to fully grieve and make sense of the loss. Participants learned to disregard their pain as something in the past or coped by seeking control over future relationships through distrust and low expectations in order to lessen or avoid emotionally experiencing the pain of additional losses. Still, the stories of many participants indicate a pervasive state of yearning to feel and experience a "home," mixed feelings about the viability of their biological parents to both physically and psychologically provide this, and distrust in alternative or new relationships (e.g., adoption) as a way to experience a family and home where one truly belongs. At the time of our interviews, few young adults discussed relationships or family settings in which there was unquestionable permanence, belonging, and a mutually deep emotional connection. There is little in their stories to suggest that most have found emotional supports to cope with or grieve these losses over time. It is not surprising that they name emotional support as the most important but absent category of supports.

This report also illustrates how cycling in and out of relationships and family systems, a hallmark of the experience of young people who age out of foster care, creates a unique level of relational complexity in their social networks. This complexity rippled through their network maps, appearing as support network members who served dual roles or biological parents being included out of hopes for closeness or because of a sense of familial obligation. It also emerged in their descriptions of managing their interpersonal world through distrust and low expectations. This report reinforces earlier work by Kools (1999) that indicates young people develop self-protective coping mechanisms (e.g., self-distancing) to navigate the chronic relational instability they experience. Consequently, their desires to find relationships that fill missing roles (e.g., parental) are often at odds with their existing emotional and relational coping patterns, in which they distrust, quickly reject, or guard against attachments to others.

A primary aim of this study was to explore relational permanence from the perspectives of those who have foster care backgrounds. This study identifies several components within their definitions of relational permanence that are important to consider. First, this study highlights the importance youth and young adults ascribe to the few relationships that have endured their time in foster care. These are connections in which there is a shared history and a pattern of mutual companionship (i.e., "being there") across their most difficult moments in life.

Both caseworkers and peers were noted as those who knew participants over time and had this special insight. It is perhaps the value of a shared past that also fuels their hopes to return to biological parents to create or re-create emotional bonds. The fact that most inner-circle members had been known for 5 years and twenty young adults named at least one person who had known them all their lives reinforces the value of relational longevity. Although adults are clearly an important source of support, peers and siblings mentioned in inner-circle networks were often seen as crucial to surviving foster care and myriad disrupted relationships. Given the impermanence of many relationships in foster care, having someone with whom one's life story is entwined was viewed as a special feature of some of their closest relationships.

Although adults are clearly an important source of support, peers and siblings mentioned in inner-circle networks were often seen as crucial to surviving foster care and myriad disrupted relationships. Given the impermanence of many relationships in foster care, having someone with whom one's life story is entwined was viewed as a special feature of some of their closest relationships.

However, their stories also make clear the ways in which emotional closeness and longevity in relationships can be independent. The report illustrates this second aspect of relational permanence. Some relationships that were viewed as permanent by participants were not perceived as emotionally close. Likewise, some young adults doubted the longevity of their closest relationships. As readers were cautioned earlier, the presence of a network member anywhere on the network map did not necessarily indicate an emotionally close relationship, as revealed during the interview. Therefore, though relationships that were close and survived the years in foster care represented important assets, relationships were not automatically close solely because the young adult had known someone for a long time. This is an important distinction to consider as we work toward relational permanence in ways that do not assume an existing or evolving level of emotional attachment.

Thirdly, young adults' varied experiences with being parented in foster care created a unique sense of self as part of a family system (or not) and shaped their subsequent needs for familial support, particularly from adult network members. There are some things one cannot go back and change. One cannot be re-parented as a child and one cannot erase events or traumas that have occurred. These young adults missed out on having one parent or one set of parents who could be both physically and psychologically present in uninterrupted, nurturing ways throughout their entire childhoods. Participants identified the ways in which these realities marked them as different by referring to others as "people who grew up in regular families" or using the label "real family" to distinguish an experience where one's

family and parents were both physically *and* psychologically present. Still, many participants in their early adulthoods continue to see the importance of having a parental figure. Whether for the wisdom an adult's advice can bring, or a deeper relationship with one's biological parent to experience mothering or fathering, these young adults have not outgrown their need for a sense of family. Few people do. The findings in this study that some young people reach out to others to fill their needs for what this analysis calls "familial support" underscores the importance of family across the life course. The pattern among a subgroup of participants in this study who try to fill this need for support through relationships with professionals illustrates one challenge in permanently meeting their familial support needs.

Similarly, participants did not trust adoption as a reliable path to ensure access to familial support. Young adults believed that being adopted did not guarantee permanence or that one would feel a sense of family belonging and closeness. Although these findings make clear that among those we interviewed, most desired the *feeling* and *experience* of closeness, love, and belonging, they did not link this to adoption. Their knowledge of how race, gender, and age operate in society and child welfare practice, and in shaping preferences of adopters, created added disincentives to take adoption seriously. Additionally, participants' enduring attachments and allegiance to their biological families, particularly their biological mothers, played a role in their understanding of, and lack of interest in, adoption.

These findings clearly support continued efforts to connect youth and young adults, even those no longer in foster care, with family systems on whose support they can depend. However, this report underscores the many challenges facing child welfare practice and policy in the attempt to achieve permanency through adoption for older youth.

The experiences and relational networks presented in this report must not be solely interpreted as stories of loss and deficit. Throughout their interviews, these youth and young adults offered examples of exercising their agency and resistance to a child welfare system and structure that repeatedly excluded their participation.

The experiences and relational networks presented in this report must not be solely interpreted as stories of loss and deficit. Throughout their interviews, these youth and young adults offered examples of exercising their agency and resistance to a child welfare system and structure that repeatedly excluded their participation. Participants sometimes sabotaged efforts to change caseworkers or placements. Although few participants were actively involved in the construction and execution of their official case plans for permanency, they resisted by privately holding on to their own permanency plans. Many of them were implementing and pursuing these plans at the time of our interviews. In this way, foster care was

viewed as a season that would change, bringing opportunities to reconnect and exercise increased personal agency over their lives and relationships. Sometimes this involved reconnecting with biological parents and siblings; sometimes it also meant beginning new relationships with significant others, spouses, and participants' own children. To be sure, their relationships will continue to change, and their support networks will certainly reflect those changes. Despite the challenges of being removed from biological family, inconsistent contact with biological parents and siblings, and changing placement settings, participants managed to maintain some relationships over time. They remained committed to preserving the relationships that were important to them. Many of them have developed identities as young adults with foster care backgrounds who are inspired to give back to other young people in that community. Clearly this sample is biased in that it has recruited participants from a larger population of individuals who are active in programs targeting young people aging out of foster care. However, their very existence offers testimony to the choices and commitments some young people make to passing on their lessons learned to younger generations of youth in foster care. So doing can be empowering to those providing the help and must be recognized as one positive outcome occurring during their young adulthoods. Likewise, only one young adult initially left his network map blank. This means that these young people do have a support network from which they receive varied levels and types of supports. Again, those we interviewed are perhaps most representative of other young people who are engaged and connected to foster care–related networks and formal support systems. However, this study found this group of young adults connected to *informal* networks and systems of support as well. In fact, those involved in this study had primarily informal sources of support (e.g., kin, friends) across both the inner and middle circles of their network maps. This counters a potential argument that young people involved in formal networks do so because they lack informal networks of support.

Finally, the use of the poem "A Reason, a Season, or a Lifetime" appeared helpful for a few young adults in understanding relational impermanence. It normalized relational instability and supported young adults in understanding that when someone is no longer physically present, the value of the relationship is not lost. It perhaps offers an alternative coping skill by anticipating change and reframing loss in terms of what is gained. A number of participants noted that they were at the stage of learning discernment, attempting to figure out the role some relationships might play in their futures. Many were anticipating changes in their relational networks, particularly with friends and professionals. Although they tended to hope that every relationship would last "forever," many seemed to realize that

this expectation for all relationships might not be appropriate. In conclusion, the following recommendations for policy and practice support the development of relational skills among young people to sustain interpersonal connections and healthy relationships. This includes facilitating their development of relationships and family networks that are both close and can last a lifetime.

Several findings in this report warrant attention. They are introduced here in hopes of inspiring further investigation through research and informing a rich discussion about the development of supports through policy and practice for youth and young adults, both while in foster care and after exiting care. The recommendations are as follows:

- The identification of emotional support as a missing and much-needed support must not be taken lightly. It was viewed as an essential support among this population both while in care and in early adulthood. Emotional support should be considered as an umbrella term under which a range of potential supports exist, including formal mental health interventions (e.g., counseling/therapy), peer or co-facilitated counseling, support groups, a reconsidered role of caseworkers and foster parents, and the development of existing informal network members as emotional supports.

The need for emotional support was a thread that ran through all of the interviews. This need included, but certainly extended beyond, access to mental health support in the form of counseling. Participants typically viewed emotional support as important to process past issues of abuse or neglect in their biological families as well as difficult experiences they had while in care. Yet emotional issues tied to their pasts sometimes also reemerged as they entered relationships with significant others, searched for or reconnected with biological parents, or became parents themselves. Consequently, this analysis suggests added need for emotional support in dealing with the return home, the emotional complexities of navigating relationships with biological parents, foster parents, and the formation of new relationships. Though some participants certainly noted a need for formal mental health interventions, more often their understanding of emotional support was to have access to someone they trusted to whom they could talk. This was someone who could provide informed emotional guidance and a level of insight not currently available to them within their social support networks. Other studies have indicated consequences for youth and young adults who navigate the emotional residue tied to their family of origin and foster care experiences on their own and consequently develop survivalist self-reliance (Samuels & Pryce, under review) and protective coping skills of self-distancing (Kools, 1999). These patterns of coping were evident

among participants in this study and often worked at cross purposes with their desires to develop close relationships that lasted over time. Consequently, this study acknowledges the individual-level barriers to accessing formal and informal emotional and mental health supports. In fact, young adults indicated their own past and present rejection of, or resistance to, therapy that had been made available to them. Similarly, the chronic experience of relational impermanence and ambiguous loss created through caseworker turnover and multiple placement moves added structural barriers to accessing informal emotional supports in the form of adults who know the participants over time. However, these findings point to several potential routes to consider.

First, more creative methods of providing emotional support services are needed outside of traditionally delivered mental health intervention. Indeed, ensuring

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access to formal therapy and counseling through health care insurance and the availability of clinicians who are sensitive to the unique socio-emotional issues facing youth in foster care remain priorities. Particularly for youth with acute and/or chronic mental and emotional illnesses, the ability to achieve successful independence is directly tied to the successful management of their emotional and mental health. However, even among participants who expressed less clinically serious emotional challenges or mental health histories, significant amounts of energy and time were spent figuring out relationships and coping on their own with emotions related to issues of abandonment, rejection, and often unmet desires to feel a sense of "home." Consequently, there is a missed opportunity among those professionals and adults involved while youth are in care to provide guidance and emotional support. Youth and young adults should not have to make sense on their own of their removal from home, their placement into care, the construction and failure of various permanency plans, and their feelings about adoption and allegiance to their biological families. This means engaging in frequent dialogue with youth in foster care over time. It requires a depth of conversation beyond informing youth about what will happen or simply asking a child what they want or with whom they want to live. Caseworkers and foster parents, even if temporary relationships, are present during crucial moments in the lives of youth in foster care. The presence of adults who can guide conversations about how youth are experiencing foster care and subsequently making sense of it could provide important emotional support at key moments in their foster care experience and in their general development during childhood.

Second, the value participants place on peer and insider wisdom for insight and understanding should not be ignored. The findings of this study support the use of peer counseling, either individual or group, in programs targeting youth in foster care. It is important to note that simply sharing a traumatic life event or significant experience does not cause one to be healed from it enough to help others. The use of peer support must take this into serious consideration. However, co-facilitated groups where peers are matched with clinicians or become trained to provide a venue for younger youth in foster care to process some of their experiences and related emotions could be invaluable to some young people.

Finally, some young people may have relationships with adults who could offer emotional support in navigating their relationally complex lives. While youth and young adults are still involved in foster care–related programs, efforts should be made to enhance and develop existing relationships with adults who youth trust, or with whom trust could be strengthened. Sometimes participants shared experiences with foster parents or adult biological relatives to whom they went for support and instead were left with feelings of emotional disconnection. This occurred, for example, when foster parents expressed their feelings of rejection because of a young adult's desires to return home to his/her biological family. Building the capacity of existing relationships to offer more empathic and insightful emotional support could provide important resources for youth as they leave foster care and continue to deal with the emotions and questions raised by their experiences prior to, and during, foster care.

While youth and young adults are still involved in foster care–related programs, efforts should be made to enhance and develop existing relationships with adults who youth trust, or with whom trust could be strengthened.

- This study supports a youth development (Collins, 2004) philosophy of child welfare practice, specifically in considering how to establish and sustain relational permanence in the lives of older youth in foster care. Central to this is the development of relational skills to sustain interpersonal connections. This includes challenging the very notion of "independent living" and moving toward more interdependent and interrelated notions of healthy adulthood (Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003).

This study identified a number of contextual and interpersonal factors that together sometimes challenged participants in forming and keeping close relationships. These included cycling in and out of foster homes, failed reunification efforts, and experiencing multiple caseworkers. Their foster care experiences, while effectively teaching them how to begin new relationships, did little to provide experiential

opportunities to develop relational skills for sustaining or repairing relationships. Likewise, many young adults felt they lacked control over the course of their relationships. Sometimes this may have been an accurate understanding of a relationship that would change over time. Other times, however, there was little participants believed they could do to contribute to the longevity (and quality) of some relationships that mattered to them. Consequently, taking a youth development approach encourages the inclusion of relational skill development within existing skill-based curricula preparing youth with foster care backgrounds for adulthood. Part of achieving relational permanence rests on young adults' relational skills to sustain healthy mutually supportive relationships as opposed to simply ending or avoiding negative ones.

…the findings of this study suggest that these young adults are not yearning for disconnection in their adulthoods, but for interpersonal connections. Though it may seem counter to the philosophies within many "independent living" skills-based curricula, this study suggests that central to successful adult independence is relational interdependence.

This also challenges the notion of successful adulthood as engendering solely one's ability to be independent. Certainly, the success of these young adults will depend on their abilities to financially provide for themselves and manage their economic and physical well-being. However, few adults truly live independent, self-reliant lives (Propp, Ortega, NewHeart, 2003; Samuels & Pryce, under review). Instead, the findings of this study suggest that these young adults are not yearning for disconnection in their adulthoods, but for interpersonal connections. Though it may seem counter to the philosophies within many "independent living" skills-based curricula, this study suggests that central to successful adult independence is relational interdependence. Efforts to build skills among young adults aging out of foster care must attend not only to their economic and physical well-being, but to developing their relational skills to ensure their socio-emotional well-being.

■ In thinking about relational permanence, the role of biological family must be extended beyond that family's official or legal status in a child's permanency plan. Biological family remains psychologically present for participants despite their physical separation. Taking a family- and child-centered approach that recognizes multiple family relationships, memberships, and affiliations could represent an important philosophical, policy, and practice shift. In this way, the need for a youth's vigilant allegiance to a single family setting may be lessened by a child welfare approach that engages a more broad and dynamic conceptualization of family.

Whether youth and young adults are involved in or excluded from the permanency-planning process, they have their own permanency plans in their minds. One of the most typical personally held plans while they were still in foster care was to be reunified with biological parents. Consequently, it was not unusual for young adults who could, to venture "home" to biological family members upon exiting the child welfare system. It is recommended that transitional and independent-living programs account for this reality as they prepare young people for adulthood. Work with youth around these journeys home can also be informed by family systems literature and theory related to non-foster care populations of adults returning home after long separations (e.g., *You Can Go Home Again,* McGoldrick, 1995), as well as adoption literature describing the complexities inherent in reconnecting with one's family of origin. Similarly, as the field of adoption moves in the direction of open adoptions (Freundlich, 2007), foster care and general child welfare practice must recognize that foster children also yearn for understanding the meaning of their biological family and specifically biological parents in their adult identities and futures. Likewise, literatures in the area of divorce and stepfamilies now recognize the damage done to children when they are left to choose between their biological parents or commit to vigilant loyalties (Bagshaw, 2007; Dowling & Gorell-Barnes, 1999), sometimes for the parent with less power (Emery & Dillon, 1994). It is at least equally emotionally insensitive and traumatizing to place foster children in a position where they must emotionally choose between the many parental figures and family systems to which they hold (or are expected to hold) varied attachments and memberships. Our practice models must evolve in ways that embrace the more fluid and dynamic conceptualizations of family as experienced and lived not only by youth in foster care (Samuels & Curry, 2006) but by many individuals in contemporary U.S. society (McGoldrick, 1999; Walsh, 2003). Work with young people around these issues of ambiguous loss and developing a sense of belonging (Bamba & Haight, 2006) could be greatly benefited by integrating work from these fields.

In the end, this report is a statement on the centrality of family broadly defined and the importance of having relationships across one's lifetime in which one is truly known, loved, and supported. Despite the many obstacles and complexities inherent in this population's access to familial support and relational permanence, their enduring hope for it challenges those involved in child welfare policy and

practice to likewise commit to not only their physical safety, but their emotional and psychological safety and security. In closing, Joanna offers words of advice to young people to continue to hope and remain open to the possibility of experiencing a close and lasting relationship, experiencing "something," with someone, someday:

> *I would say that, you know, try and keep your heart open to that. I mean, you can't force somebody to become close to you, you can't expect somebody to become close to you. But, definitely try and kept it open to relation—you know, to have a relationship with someone and not, you know, try not to shut down or self-sabotage. Just kind of keep it open. If it happens, it'll develop on its own. And if not, then not, and one day you'll have something.*

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APPENDIX: NETWORK MAP

(Adapted from Antonucci, 1986)
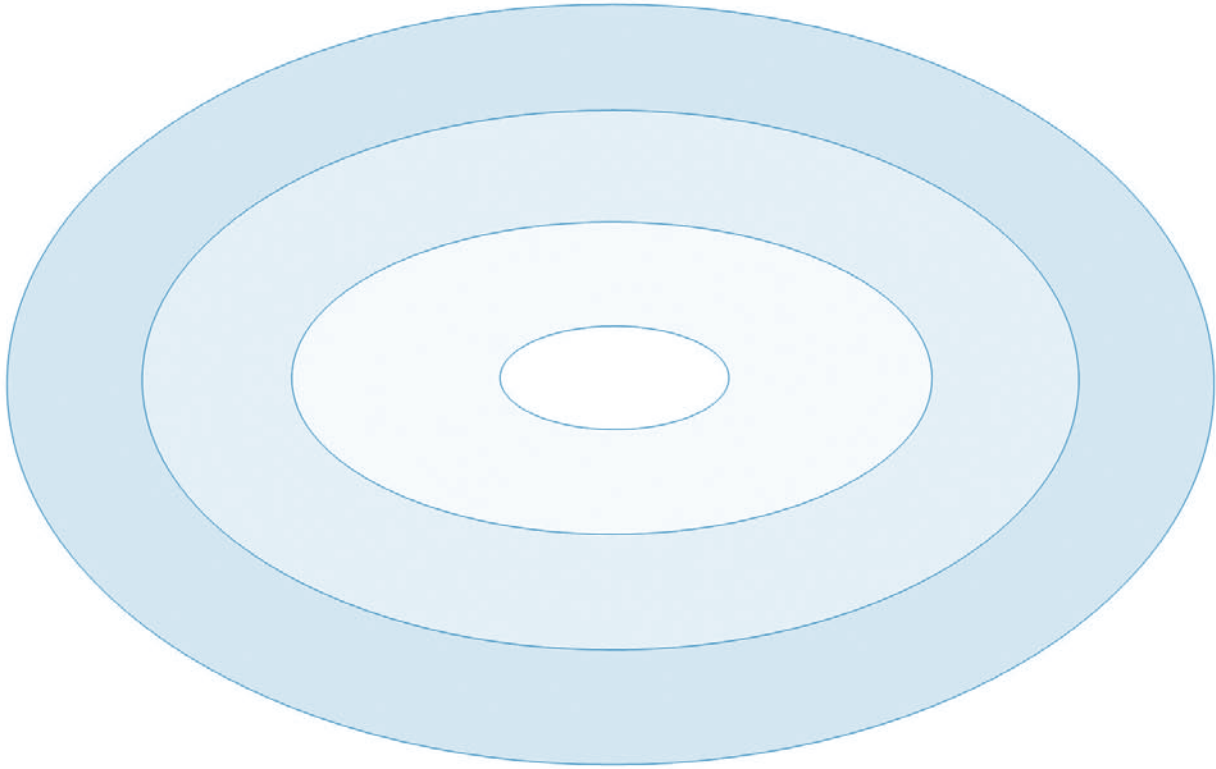
Directions:

First, choose a "fake name" and write that in the center. Then:

Inner circle: List those people to whom you feel so close that it is hard to imagine life without them.

Middle circle: List people to whom you may not feel quite that close but who are still important to you.

Outer circle: List people whom you haven't already mentioned, but who are close enough and important enough in your life that they should be placed in your personal network.

Chapin Hall Center for Children

Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago was established in 1985 as an applied research center dedicated to bringing sound information, rigorous analyses, innovative ideas, and an independent perspective to the ongoing public debate about the needs of children and adolescents and the ways in which those needs can best be met.

Chapin Hall focuses its work on all children and youth, while devoting special attention to children facing special risks or challenges, such as poverty, abuse and neglect, and mental and physical illness. The contexts in which children are supported—primarily their families and communities—are of particular interest.

Chapin Hall's work is shaped by a dual commitment to the worlds of research and policy. This requires that our work meet both the exacting standards of university research and the practical needs of policy and program development, and that we work to advance knowledge and to disseminate it.

Chapin Hall is committed to diversity not only of experience, discipline, and viewpoint, but also of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and physical ability. Chapin Hall's commitment to all children and youth is reflected in the range of our research projects and publications. The following represent Chapin Hall's major areas of endeavor:

- Children's services, covering the problems that threaten children and the systems designed to address them, including child welfare, mental health, public assistance, education, and juvenile justice.

- Community building, focusing on the development, documentation, and evaluation of community-building initiatives designed to make communities more supportive of children and families, and the resources in communities that support the development and well-being of all children.

- International projects, covering Chapin Hall's collaboration with children's policy researchers and research centers in other countries.