



MAKING THE CASE FOR ONGOING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN YOUTH AND THOSE WHO MATTER TO THEM – BEFORE PERMANENCY AND BEYOND

A Guide to Presentation to the Court and Legal Community

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Produced by the Family Connections Project

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MAKING THE CASE FOR ONGOING CONNECTIONS BEFORE PERMANENCY AND BEYOND

A Guide to Presenting Ongoing Connections to the Legal Community

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MAKING THE CASE FOR ONGOING CONNECTIONS BEFORE PERMANENCY AND BEYOND

Introduction

The goal of the Family Connections Project is to increase youth connections and permanency through a model that educates youth, families, child welfare professionals, and court personnel about openness in permanency; mediates open permanency arrangements; and fosters their successful implementation.

This manual is the court component of the basic curriculum. All of the components – youth, foster and adoptive families, workers, and court personnel – work together to inform the community about the benefits of lifelong connections and permanency for older youth and to pave the way for successful implementation of the Family Connections Project. The Family Connections Project is made possible by a grant from the U.S. Children’s Bureau.*

Law is about precedent. Fostering change in a legal system is a challenge for anyone. It is a particular challenge for those who are not members of the legal community but rather are among those who come before the court. State agencies, child welfare organizations, and youth who are wards of the court all fit in the latter category. Success at fostering change in juvenile courts rests with the ability to mobilize those in positions of authority within the court in support of your cause.

The charge of this manual is to present audience-specific education to legal and court personnel about the benefits of open permanency arrangements that are based on the comprehensive curriculum provided by Adoptions Unlimited, Inc. (AUI) for use in this project.

Each element of this charge is critical to the success of the endeavor and bears consideration.

- **Audience specific** – Can this be your whole legal community, or must judges be addressed separately from other audiences? Determine this at the outset. It may be desirable to address judges and attorneys together for the shared experience, but numbers and/or local protocol may not permit.

* This grant is to adapt and augment curriculum provided by Adoptions Unlimited, Inc. for use in training legal personnel under the Family Connections Project, a five-year Adoption Opportunities grant from the U.S. Children’s Bureau. The activities for this project will be coordinated through Adoptions Unlimited, Inc. 120 W. Madison, Suite 800, Chicago, IL 60602.

- **Based on the Basic Curriculum** – The presentation may vary in language and technique from the curriculum offered to the other segments of the community – youth, families, and workers. The concern is that the same message is delivered and that a shared understanding and expectation is developed.
- **About the benefits of open permanency arrangements** –
 - **Benefits rather than process** – Court support of the goals and comfort with the legal framework is the objective. It is not necessary to explain expected implementation in detail at the training – this will happen over time and may change as you move forward. At this point the objective is to see that the community is prepared to accept the implementation issues at a later date.
 - **Open permanency arrangements** – Include all permanency arrangements available to youth in your jurisdiction in the discussion.*

Every jurisdiction will be different in terms of current practice and attitude. The process outlined in this manual provides a path to address the relevant areas in which each court is ready to move forward.

You may want to use a variation of the process described in this manual to build a jurisdiction-specific curriculum, or you may choose to use the curriculum given with modifications to suit your needs.

A successful program requires at a minimum a review of the curriculum materials with a representative of the judiciary and of each of the court attorney offices – prosecutor, attorney for the child, attorney for the parents, and representative of the child welfare agency. This review allows you to learn the extent to which the prospective audience understands the need of older youth for continuing relationships with family of origin **and** for membership in a permanent family. It also permits you to identify the court-specific barriers to achievement of that goal for all foster youth in your jurisdiction.

* The Cook County project training was focused initially on continuing connections for youth moving to adoption and guardianship. It was very important to both the judges and the lawyers for the young people that the scope of the project be expanded to include the many youth who age out of the child welfare system without a permanent family and that the issue of open adoption not be directly addressed.

You'll know that your efforts have been worthwhile when you hear from the youth whose experiences give them firsthand knowledge of the benefits of ongoing connections.

This inspiring letter was written by one of our enthusiastic participants, Jeremy, a youth advisor to the Ongoing Connections Project.

Dear Peggy,

Wow, this looks absolutely awesome, and I would love to help in any way, shape, or form. Particularly, I would love to help April in the beginning when she discusses how it feels to lose family. This is an area that I have personally experienced and something that I think is very important. If I can't help here, I would be more than willing and excited to help in another area.

After reading the curriculum, I think that it sounds very good, but I do have some concerns, which may or may not have been covered in your meeting with April. In the section of youth consultants' concerns, I would like to add to the last statement. How will youth know how to word and write their document in a legal context? Will these youth be in college or high school? Who chooses whether youth are acceptable for the court hearing?

Besides these small questions, I thought that the curriculum was excellent, and the documents that I have seen seem very organized. I believe that, if we present this material, we will gain the attention and respect of the courts.

Thank you very much and I would like to stress again how important to me it is to be involved in this project. The issue of family connections is something that is very important to me, and I think that the concerns I have are legitimate, and I would love to see the success of this program and see positive results in the lives of youth.

Thank you,
Jeremy

Trainer's Notes

There are at least 3 ways that this manual can be used to prepare for an Ongoing Connections presentation in your court.

- As is. Find a strong presenter, use the video, and set the date.
- Customize the script. Meet with representatives of your court to review the script and customize it to the practice and needs of your community.
- Make it your own.
 - Follow the steps described in the “Lay the Foundation” section and Appendix D of the manual to get to know your court community and to use the preparation period as a platform for success in your future work to establish and sustain ongoing connections for foster youth.
 - Read the “Voice of the Youth” section and Appendix E of the curriculum and plan on recruiting and working with local youth who have a message about ongoing connections that they would like to deliver to the court.

Obviously, it is much easier to use the materials as you find them than it is to make the program your own. As in most things, however, the more you work directly with the community that you want to impact, the more effective the program will be.

Whichever path you choose, we hope that these materials will help you to engage the judges and attorneys of the juvenile court in a thoughtful dialogue about the importance of continuity of relationships for youth in care.

Specific attainable outcome goals

By the end of this presentation participants will:

- Understand the importance of maintaining existing connections for youth in the foster care system.
- Understand how maintaining existing connections will serve as a tool for promoting permanency for youth in the foster care system.
- Understand that openness is a continuum of varying degrees based on the connections and needs of the youth.
- Understand how integrating the youth's past with his future is essential for achieving permanence.

- Understand how they can play a part in helping youth to maintain appropriate ongoing connections as the youth move from foster care to permanency.

Trainer's Essential Preparation Activities

- Meet with judges and lawyers to introduce the project and pave the way for court participation. See the section "Lay the Foundation" for much more on this.
- Identify and work with youth presenters. See the section "Voice of the Youth" and Appendix E of the curriculum for much more on this.
- Take photos of youth for invitations or other promotional activities within the court (with permission of adoptive parents or guardians for minors, including the agency guardian for minors who are wards of the court).
- See that all target audiences are adequately notified and/or invited.
- Arrange for conversational time between youth and judges, if possible.
- Arrange for lunch, if appropriate, and snacks for each presentation.
- Reserve the room and arrange for required furniture.
- Arrange for audiovisual equipment and test it before the presentation day and right before the presentation is to begin.
- Arrange for project staff to help with the break-out groups, to see that they stay on task and that implementation suggestions are recorded.
- Be sure to tell the kids that judges can't help if they are late.
- Tell the attorneys that the youth are not prepared to answer questions.
- Prepare and distribute a presentation agenda. A sample agenda follows:

Ongoing Connections for Youth in Foster Care (insert date)

Agenda*

Moderator – (insert name)

- Introduction to Family Connections Project and program
- “In My Shoes” - (insert presenter’s name)
- Defining ongoing connections and the role of these connections in the permanency plan for the youth in care
- Ongoing Connections Youth Video (use video made by Family Connections Project or produce a video featuring foster youth from local area)
- Ongoing Connections Youth Panel
- Break-out groups for comment and implementation recommendations. Participants are grouped by professional role and facilitated by a previously designated member of the professional group, one or more youth panelists, and a child welfare agency staff person.
- Brief report back on implementation suggestions from groups
- Conclusion

* See Appendix A: Preparation Activities for Presentation to the Child Welfare Division of the Cook County Circuit Court, Chicago, Illinois for referenced material.

Ongoing Connections for Youth in Foster Care

The Presentation*

(Adapted from Virginia Sturgeon's curriculum material for the Family Connections Project)

Moderator

I. Welcome and Introduction to the Project – (2 minutes)

- Project goal – to meet needs of older youth in the foster care system to maintain family and other important relationships while moving to permanent families or other supportive situations that will serve them well as they grow into young adults
- This is a five-year project funded by the Children's Bureau of the Department of Health and Human Services.
- Sites in several other states received identical grants and will be sharing information over the project period.
- Youth, workers, members of the legal profession, and prospective resource families will be trained.
- Those youth, their prospective families, and their families of origin will be provided with services to attain the goals that we talk about today and tracked for outcomes over the course of the project.

II. Introduction to the Presentation (3 minutes)

- Achieving permanence for older youth in the foster care system has always been a challenge.
- Today we consider the relationship of youth in care with their family of origin. These relationships, though important to the youth, are often viewed as a barrier to permanency.
- We will consider connections with family of origin as a tool for achieving permanence for older youth – listening to the youth themselves and asking for input from their perspective, both as a caring adult and as an officer of the court.

* See Appendix B: Handouts for material referenced in this section.

- We often hear youth frame reluctance about moving to adoption or guardianship, or concerns about making it on their own, in terms of their relationships with people who are important to them. They do not want to turn their backs on parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, and others for whom they care deeply.
- Termination of parental rights may terminate legal relationships with a child's family of origin, but most children want to remain connected in one way or another.
- Maintaining family relationships brings new challenges to the table, but also offers new opportunities. Rather than allow that desire to become an obstacle to success, we must learn how to support safe contact that permits the young person to move on with his or her life.
- We are here today to learn about these concerns from youth who have lived the experience.
- Before we leave, we will reflect on how we as officers of the court can help youth in care to both maintain the relationships that are important to them and move ahead successfully in their lives.

III. In My Shoes (15 minutes)

Speaker guides the audience through an exploration of the impact of loss of primary connections.

IV. What are Ongoing Connections? (5minutes) Training Coordinator

Whether they are on their own or with a loving family, whether they are moving forward with confidence or struggling, all former foster youth—like all other people—deserve to be able to reach out to their family of origin.

Ongoing connections are relationships that are maintained so that young people know how and when they can be in touch with the people who mean a lot to them. For many youth, the connection that matters most is with their siblings. Many older youth state emphatically that they would rather remain in foster care and be with their siblings, or be able to see them regularly, than to have a permanent family. Why should they have to choose?

Whatever the youth's situation as he leaves care – adoption, guardianship, or independence- connections with siblings, parents, and other important people from his or her past can reflect a full range of relationships.

The type and frequency of connection will vary depending on a number of factors. Those include:

- the desires of the youth
- the emotional or physical risk inherent in the relationship
- the willingness to reciprocate and follow the agreed plan
- the support of the new family, if one is involved

What is right for one youth and family may be entirely wrong for another; thoughtful consideration is required from all involved. Contact may be with a sibling, parent, grandparent, cousin, former foster parent, teacher, or any other person who is important to the youth.

The wide range of contact plans includes:

- letters exchanged through an agency or monitored by a parent
- phone calls or e-mails
- occasional supervised visits
- designated holidays spent together
- regular visits outside of the home
- the special person included as a part of the permanent family's "extended family"
- all of the above in any combination that works

It is important to remember that youth can remain connected to important people in their life in many ways. Remaining connected does not always mean face to face contact. When openness is being explored a clear understanding and agreement on the type and frequency of contact is reached by all parties involved.

V. Ongoing Connections as a Tool in Permanency Planning (15 minutes)

As you thought about your own connections, you may have identified a pattern of change. For example, when you got married or moved to a new city, did you give up all contact with family or friends? You may see people less or get in touch with them in different ways.

For most of us, changes in friends and family are gradual. Those that continue throughout our lives are critical to our sense of self. A recent study of youth in DCFS care found that the only statistically significant indicator of improved mental health of the foster children in the study was their ongoing relationship with extended family. This was found to be true even for those children living with relatives.*

* Child Well Being Study, 2005, Children and Family Research Center, Univ. of Illinois.

Family is important to you and me, to youth in care, and it is important to youth who are leaving care as well, whether they are leaving as members of a new family or to make it on their own.

Many of our relationships have an “ebb and flow” to them. When there is strain or stress in a relationship, we may choose to lessen our connection with that person for a time, resuming it or strengthening it when the issue is resolved or when we are better able to manage that “stress.” The same holds true for youth in the foster care system.

We can allow foster youth some control in the relationships that are important to them. We can help them to find a way to modify the relationship that protects them from risk, relieves the stresses, and yet gives them some remaining access to the people that they love.

Connections are essential to everyone. The people, places, and things to which you are connected define who you are. They are components of your identity and essential to your physical and emotional wellbeing. Just as you are able to integrate new connections into your life, youth needing permanence can integrate significant people from their past with a permanent family.

There are benefits for all of the parties:

- Youth – are allowed to continue relationships that contribute to their identity and self-esteem and that keep them connected with people that they love. As the family of origin interacts with the new family, they may give permission to the youth to accept the new family, which alleviates feelings of disloyalty.
- Those that youth value – rather than feeling cast off and totally rejected can continue to be some part of the young person’s life.
- New family –
 - Acceptance of his origins promotes youth’s attachment to the new family.
 - Observation of relationship with family of origin helps new family to better understand the young person and his past.
 - Continued contact may avoid the displacement of anger at the birth family that youth often project on a new family when the birth family is not available.

- The new family has the benefit of being able to help youth accept the reality of the birth family situation rather than dealing with fantasy about the birth family or worry about how they are faring.

VI. Why has Maintaining Existing Connections not been Pursued for Older Youth in the Past? Training Coordinator

The child welfare system, as a whole, has been resistant to supporting youth connections to people from their past, and especially so when they enter a new permanent family.

It isn't hard to understand why. We hear many arguments against it. Let's examine some of them. I am going to ask the youth to consider these issues with me. (A single youth may be prepared to respond to all of the arguments, or each youth may respond to an argument about which he or she feels strongly.)

For this discussion, the following statements were selected. See Appendix B: Handouts for responses from youth who participated in the Ongoing Connections presentation for the Child Protection Division, Cook County Circuit Court.

Presenter:

- One argument we hear is that the birth families are dysfunctional.
- Youth have been abused or neglected by the very people they want to see.
- A permanent family will not be open to the youth maintaining these connections.
- Continued contact with the birth family will cause the youth to have problems attaching to the new family
- Contact with people from the youths' past will be detrimental to their ongoing adjustment into a new family.
- Many workers believe that, after termination of parental rights, it is illegal to maintain family connections. The reluctance in the world of child welfare to undertake the challenge of supporting connections for youth in foster care has, however, frequently worn the guise of being

forbidden by law, or at least being a grey legal area into which one best not wander.*

VII. How Could Support of Lifelong Connections Facilitate the Achievement of Permanency? Training coordinator

An assurance that she does not have to give up all emotional relationships from the past in order to explore a potential new future will enable many young people to move forward. Integrating your past with your present life is an essential component of mental health for all of us. We expect young people for whom life has been extraordinarily difficult to assume emotional burdens that most of us never have to consider.

We can provide support for varying degrees of openness/connections with the significant people from the youths' past while helping them integrate those relationships with the new ones they develop with permanent families or supportive institutions.

Why does this matter? Who are some of the people that youth might want to stay connected to even after they join a permanent family? What would those relationships be like?

These are not easy questions. We are lucky to have with us today some of the people who know this subject the best – those who have lived it. Let's listen to what they have to say.

Introduce the youth panel.

VIII. Youth Presentation – youth experiences and perspectives - moderated by (insert name)

- Youth Video “Family Connections” -- 15 minutes
Included in the pocket of this manual
- Youth Panel -- 30 minutes
See Appendix E: The Voice of the Youth for approximate transcripts of the youth presentations, prepared by the youth themselves.

At the conclusion of the panel, the panel moderator returns the floor to the judge who introduced the session.

*It is up to us who know and practice the law to clarify that the law does not prohibit ongoing connections. To help older youth find permanency, workers, families, and agencies must recognize the importance of these connections. A clear delineation of the legal status of these relationships by the officers of the court would be a significant contribution to the achievement of permanency by older youth.

IX. Small Groups Meet and Report Back (35 minutes total) - Judge

Court officers and individual attorneys need to identify what they can do to make ongoing family connections possible for foster youth.

Judge announces that we will divide into small groups by office affiliation and answer specific questions related to making this happen.

Each office has previously named a facilitator and alternate who will be present and will lead the small group discussion. The facilitator leads the group discussion, the alternate acts as a scribe. Each small group also has at least one youth panel member and one Family Connections Project staff member participating.

Divide the group by office (or groups of judicial officers) to answer the following questions: (20 minutes)

- How does preservation of ongoing connections for foster youth moving to permanency relate to your office mission?
- What are the challenges to maintaining relationships of young adults in foster care to relatives and significant others?
- What can you do to make ongoing connections possible for youth moving to permanency?
 - As an office
 - As an individual attorney, hearing officer, or judge

Report back: (15 minutes)

Each small group reports back its answers to the three questions to the entire group. They are instructed to keep their reports to three minutes or less.

X. Summary and Closing (5 minutes) Judge

Review key points from session, indicate you will follow through on recommendations, and close.

Important points covered today include:

- Connections are essential to everyone. The people, places, and things to which you are connected define who you are. They are components of your identity and essential to your physical and emotional wellbeing.

- Just as you are able to integrate new connections into your life, youth needing permanence can integrate significant people from their past with a permanent family.
- Keeping a youth connected to important people can facilitate the acceptance and achievement of permanence for the youth.
- Openness and maintaining connections can be in varying degrees, from a low level of openness to a high level.
- There are benefits to maintaining connections for all the parties involved in the permanency process, not just for the youth and the birth family or other identified connection.

Thank youth, thank participants. We look forward to seeing in action the important recommendations that you have made today. Close.

Participant Materials*

Schedules – Prepare a schedule for all participants. The youth will be given a general schedule. The adults will have more detailed information.

Scripts - Each presenter has a script for his or her part of the presentation.

- Presiding judge - the opening and closing segments
- Youth advisor - the guided imagery presentation “In My Shoes”
- Training coordinator - the main content
- Youth panelist – some may rely on scripts during presentation, others may speak extemporaneously (See “The Voice of the Youth” section and Appendix E for more information.)

Implementation Suggestions forms for use by judges as a group, hearing officers as a group, and attorneys in break-out groups by office.

3 blank cards and a pencil are on each seat for use in “In My Shoes.”

Snacks – water/pop/cookies

* See Appendix C: Participant Materials, for examples of material described in this section.

Lay the Foundation Process may be the Most Important Product

Design the Presentation for Your Jurisdiction

The process involved in designing your presentation may well be the most important part of your contribution to ongoing connections for foster youth. Appendix D describes the preparation for the Cook County Experience. While it may seem to be an excessive amount of preparation for a three or four hour session exploring the potential for long-term connections for youth in care – especially when you have a sample script and a video in hand, we found that it served us well when we presented to the Cook County Circuit Court personnel.

As you shape the message with court leadership or their designees, you have a unique opportunity to invite them to expand their understanding, to challenge their assumptions, and to explore the possibilities of lifetime connections together with youth who have benefited from or long for those connections.

Well attended meetings with court personnel provide the opportunity to define the common ground and establish a working relationship among all parties on these issues to the extent possible, always advocating in the best interest of the youth.

Sparsely attended meetings provide the opportunity to strengthen alliances or resolve issues between those in attendance.

If only one person is present, you have the golden opportunity, unimpeded by an audience, to push a little harder to define the parameters of a challenge and brainstorm about how it can be overcome or to plan together with a supporting office how they will bring that support to bear over the coming year.

Any level of engagement will help you to:

- ✓ Identify allies – know why and how they will support you.
- ✓ Identify barriers – learn what they are, whom they impede, and why they are seen as impediments. Learn if they are questions of understanding, trust, legal interpretation, or merely accepted practice over time.
- ✓ Begin to build your case with decision makers and carve out the strongest position that they will deliver to their constituency and stand behind.
- ✓ Build relationships with individuals who will be helpful in the specific cases that will follow.

This preparation assures that:

- ✓ Your presentation contains the strongest message that the authorities in that court are prepared to implement.

- ✓ Those in attendance hear your message from, or with the obvious endorsement of, their bosses and the judges in whose courtrooms they practice.

Plan with the community

If your presentation is part of a larger ongoing project, enlist the guidance of the larger project work group. The group should include at least one representative of the court along with the representatives of youth, parents, and agencies. If there is no court representative on your project work group, meet with the presiding judge of your court to explain the project and request representation.

If time constraints prevent judicial and/or legal representation, make it your business to keep the presiding judge or designee aware of the goals and progress of the project. The arrival of your project at the court's door should not come as a surprise.

Balance the opinions of the court representatives who do participate with that of the total legal community. Do not be caught off guard about the magnitude of your endeavor by the fact that those most likely to work with you are those most sympathetic to your cause.

HELP THE COURT TO OWN THE PROJECT

Know your court

Speak with the presiding judge about the project, and then meet with heads of the attorney offices or their designees to explain it to them. Whether this is done in a small group or individually depends on the ease with which these people come together and the possibly varied concerns that they may have.

Listen to your court

Initial approach to the judiciary should be a separate event from discussion with attorney representatives. Discussion with attorneys for children and attorneys for parents may better be individualized depending on the history of cooperation or conflict and the varying concerns of each group.

Your ultimate goal is to bring them together to work on the ostensibly small project of preparation for the presentation. The time spent in discussion of appropriate content and scope of the presentation is a true investment in a shared understanding of how to meet the permanency needs of youth in care.

Work with your court

If this presentation is a stand alone rather than part of a larger project, meet with the presiding judge to discuss it and ask support in putting together a court-wide planning committee. This is where the heart of the work is done – adapting the project message to the needs of your jurisdiction.

If you are creating a legal subcommittee within a larger community work group, invite the presiding judge, head of the counsel for children, lead public defender, and chief of the state’s attorneys to participate themselves or designate a representative of that office.

Plan with your court

This entails coordinating meetings and/or phone conferences. Arrange all meetings at sites most convenient for the court. Arrange for transportation and make the experience as convenient as possible for the participating youth, but because of conflicting work/school schedules you may have to represent the voice of the youth at these meetings. Remember that court schedules are unpredictable for both judges and attorneys. Work with whomever shows up, catch up with the others later and keep moving toward your goal and you will get there.

The Voice of the Youth*

Young people telling their own story directly to the court community are the most effective tool that you have. Use this tool if at all possible.

An in-person panel and the video make a potent combination. The video is a great opener for the youth. Youth may be somewhat ill at ease and stiff in their presentation if this is a new experience for them. The video will have warmed the audience up and eased the way for the youth to talk.

If youth advisors are involved in your program, include them in your youth identification and preparation planning. They will likely provide excellent suggestions.

Identification

Select a diverse group of youth as participants. Include youth who have been in care and whose siblings have been adopted; youth who were adopted and maintained ongoing contact with important people in their lives; and youth who were adopted without maintaining ongoing contact with those who were important to them. Assistance in identifying the youth may come from attorneys, agencies, DCFS adoption workers, and youth advisors. (Permission from the DCFS Guardianship Administrator is needed for youth under the age of 18.)

Once youth are identified as potential panelists, send them a letter explaining the purpose of the project, the work involved, and the compensation. Ask interested youth to complete a preliminary questionnaire. By completing the questionnaire, the youth will provide a snapshot of their experiences and feelings about ongoing connections.

Send a second letter to the youth who respond to the first letter expressing interest in participating in the project. This letter will notify the youth of the date of the first scheduled meeting and include a form to be used as an outline for the youth to begin writing about their experiences. Make sure the youth understand that they are not intended to repeat someone else's words. Their own stories will be most compelling.

Preparation

The young panel members will be the most effective advocates if they are well prepared and provided with a setting in which they can shine. That is, the youth need to present their stories clearly and in an organized fashion, framed in a legal context, with concrete recommendations applicable to their audience. It is important that the youth be able to explain the impact of court and agency

* See Appendix E: The Voice of the Youth for material used in the Cook County training.

practice on their lives. Were they cut off from the people who had been close to them since they were little children? Or were they able to remain close to these people? Is ongoing contact important to them? What does it feel like to be in their shoes in terms of leaving important people behind?

It is recommended that the youth participate in at least two preparation meetings. These meetings will give everyone the opportunity to get to know one another; hear others' experiences; develop and tell their stories; have pictures taken; and discuss the video, if one is to be made; and rehearse the panel presentation. At these meetings staff can assist the youth on the format of their presentations. If adoptive parents attend the meetings, their stories may also be valuable.

Compensation

The youth who decide to participate will invest a considerable amount of time attending meetings and preparing their presentations. Payment for their assistance not only compensates them for their work but also raises their self-esteem by giving them the message that their time and expertise are essential to the success of the presentation.

Build on Your Accomplishment

A successful presentation of Ongoing Connections to the court should achieve the original outcome goals. Judges and other court personnel should:

- Understand the importance of maintaining existing connections for youth in the foster care system.
- Understand how maintaining existing connections will serve as a tool for promoting permanency for youth in the foster care system.
- Understand that openness is a continuum of varying degrees based on the connections and needs of the youth.
- Understand how integrating the youth's past with his future is essential for achieving permanence.
- Understand how they can play a part in helping youth to maintain appropriate ongoing connections as the youth move from foster care to permanency.

Achievement of these goals of understanding is the foundation for the next step – action.

Follow through will be different in each jurisdiction, depending on the needs, inclination, and time available to court personnel.* It is rare when time and inclination are available in proportion to need, but it is important not to lose the momentum generated by the direct encounter with foster youth on a personal level that is generally not available to judges or courtroom attorneys.

* See Appendix F: Build on Your Accomplishment for examples of material used in the Ongoing Connections presentation for the Child Protection Division, Cook County Circuit Court.

Appendix A

Preparation Activities for Presentation to the Child Welfare Division of the Cook County Circuit Court, Chicago, Illinois

Invitation

Preparation Activities for Presentation to the Child Welfare Division of the Cook County Circuit Court, Chicago, Illinois

Invitations (see next page) were sent to the head of each of the agencies that we wanted to reach. We asked them to identify members of their staff who should participate.

In preparation for the presentation, the Family Connections Project set up a time for youth and judges to meet. A lunch was arranged in the presiding judge's conference room. It was held at a time that the judges had previously scheduled for a luncheon meeting, so their lunches were provided. The project paid for youth and staff lunches.

The judges and hearing officers' meeting was held in the presiding judge's conference room. Forty people attended the meeting. A separate room was provided for hearing officers to use for the break-out session. In fact, we spent too long on youth presentations to have the break-out session. Judges and hearing officers included discussion of what they could do at their following regular meetings and got back to us with oral and written reports later.

Seventy attorneys attended the afternoon presentation. In preparation for the meeting, we ordered 100 chairs, 2 rectangular tables (one for speakers and one for literature and snacks), 2 circular tables, podium, microphone, and audiovisual equipment.

Ongoing Connections

For Youth in Foster Care, Guardianship and Adoption



We would like to talk with you.

July 12, 2006 • 2-4 pm
Juvenile Court Auditorium

Please join us to explore how foster youth are impacted when they maintain or lose connections with the important people in their lives, both while they are in care and when they move on to permanency. The group will also explore what we can do to support appropriate family connections for these young people.

You'll be able to hear from youth who are 13 to 23 years old and have a broad range of foster care and permanency experience. They're looking forward to sharing with you their personal joys, anxieties and concerns relating to ongoing family connections, as well as their hopes for current and future foster youth.

Questions? Call Margaret Burke, Family Connections Project Director: 312-462-7249

Family Connections Project, Adoptions Unlimited
Department of Children and Family Services
Child Protection Division, Cook County Circuit Court

Appendix B Handouts

Agenda

“In My Shoes” Training Module

Youth Responses to Arguments against Supporting Ongoing Connections

Youth Speak Out about Birth Family Connections

Moms Speak Out on Birth Family Connections

Family Connections Information Sheet

Adoptions Unlimited, Inc. Background Information

Closed File Information and Search Service

NAIC Publication “Openness in Adoption: A Fact Sheet for Families”

Agenda
Ongoing Connections for Youth in Foster Care
(insert date)
Moderator – (insert name)

Introduction to Family Connections Project and program

“In My Shoes” - (insert presenter’s name)

Defining ongoing connections and the role of these connections in the in the permanency plan for the youth in care

Ongoing Connections Youth Video (use video made by Family Connections Project or produce a video featuring foster youth from local area)

Ongoing Connections Youth Panel

Break-out groups for comment and implementation recommendations. Participants are grouped by professional role and facilitated by a previously designated member of the professional group, one or more youth panelists, and a Family Connections Staff member.

Brief report back on implementation suggestions from groups

Conclusion

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In My Shoes - A Guided Exploration of Family Connections

Hello, I am here today on behalf of all of current and former foster youth who have lost their connections with the people who were most important to them before they entered the child welfare system. I want to talk with you about how important those connections are to us.

One of the easiest ways to understand the importance of connections for others is to look at how important they are to us.

I am going begin by asking you to focus on the people in your life with whom you have the most important connections right now. You will not be asked to say their names out loud; please take just a moment to think about those people who mean the most to you.

Take three cards and write down the names of the three who are most important to in your life.

Once you have finished, think about the role that each of these individuals plays in your life. Close your eyes and think about how each of them contributes to who you are -- your sense of place in life and your emotional well being.

Hold those images in your mind. Now think about this:

You must give up your relationship with one of the three people that you have selected. You can no longer have that person as a part of your life. Choose the person that you will give up and drop the card with that name on the floor beside you.

(Give it a few seconds to sink in.)

Now that that person is gone from your life, how do you feel?

(Get one response. Make sure that they give you a feeling.)

You're probably not as self-assured as you were before. After all, you are losing the people who are the framework of your life. I am sorry that you have had to give them up. That is just how life is sometimes. Things are not too bad, though. You still have two people that you can count on.

Picture yourself now, together with the two people who remain as your most important life connections.

I hate to be the bearer of bad news, however, it is required that you give up one of them. Which one will it be?

Choose carefully, take the card representing the person that you have chosen, give it one last look and drop the piece of paper on the floor.

(Give them a few seconds to make the decision.)

If you are having trouble making the decision, I will do it for you. It is important that we move on.

Would anyone like to share who you chose to break contact with?

Look around, if a person next to you has not yet thrown a card down, take one from him and throw it on the floor.

Now you are down to a single important person in your life. How are you feeling?

(Get one response. Make sure that they give you a feeling.)

You probably feel very incomplete, perhaps angry, and maybe even desperate because the people who make your life what it is are disappearing.

Look at your last card and think about what that person brings to your life, and how special he or she is now that the others are gone.

Take one last look, and then throw the card down on the ground next to you.

What do you feel now?

(Give it a few seconds to sink in.)

For many there are feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. You may become hardened after having to give up so much and just say “Who cares? What difference does it make?” Whatever your feelings, they are probably not positive.

You have just experienced a brief simulation of a profound loss. This exercise was only that, an exercise. You still have all of your connections to the people that you care most about, people that you see and live with every day – they were not really taken away.

It is painful, however, even in an exercise to contemplate losing contact with the people that we count on and being threatened with the possibility of having someone else using their power to make that choice for us.

For youth in foster care, this is not an exercise – it is their life. And they are not able to choose who they will give up. The system that controls their lives makes that choice for them. Unless social workers, supervisors, foster parents, and the legal system make a concerted effort to keep youth connected, they are removed or cut off from many, if not all, of the people who make up their personal world.

Some youth experience total loss of connections on the day that they are removed from their homes. For some, losses continue over the initial months of foster care. Some have contact for a while and lose it over the years as they move from worker to worker and placement to placement. For all of these youth, the impact of the loss lasts a lifetime.

Youth Responses to Arguments against Supporting Ongoing Connections

Presenter: One argument that we hear is that the birth families are dysfunctional.

Youth: That does not mean that we do not care about them and they do not care about us. We know that they might not show up for a visit – we have been disappointed before. It shouldn't mean that we never can see them again.

Presenter: Youth have been abused or neglected by the very people they want to see.

Youth: That may be true. But it certainly doesn't mean that they would be a threat to us on a visit. And even if there is that chance, there are many safe ways that we can continue to see our parents and other people that we care about. We can see them in public places, or in therapists' offices or in lots of other safe ways, if that is necessary. Or we can just have letters and phone calls, if real in-person visits are impossible.

Presenter: A permanent family will not be open to the youth maintaining these connections.

Youth: Some are. My adoptive parents were. All adoptive parents should be. This project is trying to help foster parents who are adopting teens to understand that.

Presenter: Continued contact with the birth family will cause the youth to have problems attaching to the new family.

Youth: That is not true. We are much more open to a new family who accepts all parts of us, including the fact that we still care about our parents and brothers and sisters, and that many of us want to continue to see them if we can. Rejecting our ties with our birth families is rejecting a part of us. Even if we didn't want to see our family, we would rather make that decision than have somebody else make it.

Presenter: Contact with people from the youths' past will be detrimental to their ongoing adjustment into a new family.

Youth: It can make it a lot easier to settle in with a new family if you are not worried about what is going on with your birth family. It really helps to know that your birth parents know where you are, and that it is ok with them that you are with this new family and having a new life.

And, finally:

Presenter: I am told that many workers believe that after termination of parental rights it is illegal to maintain family connections. The reluctance in the world of child welfare to undertake the challenge of supporting connections for youth in foster care has, however, frequently worn the guise of being forbidden by law, or at least being a grey legal area into which one best not wander.

Youth: Termination of parental rights means that the court has decided that my birth parents are not able to take care of me. Is that supposed to mean that I cannot see my relatives again, or try to find out how my mom is doing or where my dad is? That doesn't seem right to me.

Presenter: It is up to us who know and practice the law to clarify that the law does not prohibit ongoing connections. To help older youth to find permanency, workers, families, and agencies must recognize the importance of these connections. A clear delineation of the legal status of these relationships by the officers of the court would be a significant contribution to the achievement of permanency by older youth.

Youth Speak Out about Birth Family Connections

Six of the nine youth speaking out here are former foster youth who have been adopted. Three have grown up in the system—two of them with siblings who were adopted while they were not, one who was separated from siblings in care for ten years. Please listen to what these young people have to say about the importance of continuing connections with birth families.



Jamelle says: “Not knowing your birth mother and father is like having a cut in your heart. You go to bed at night and wake up in the morning thinking about them. I have been living with my adoptive family for 9 years and being here has helped me to understand that love is unconditional. Mrs. S. is a great mother. She used to take me and my siblings to visit my birth mother in jail and I still visit her and the rest of the family. Having two mothers alone is just magnificent—now picture having two huge loving families.”



Basilia says: “Some people think it’s just not right to see your birth family because of things that happened in the past. But even if people make mistakes, they deserve another chance. Being able to see my birth parents has made my life easier. And it is not just about them, it is about my brothers too. My brothers and I should not have to give up seeing each other. Seeing my brothers makes me feel great. I think it would be great for all children to be able to see their birth families when they are in foster care or adopted.”



Jonathan says: “My advice to youth is to convince the people who won’t let you see your birth family to allow you to see them because it will help you a lot. I hadn’t had contact with them for six years, and at the age of 12, I tracked them down. I know that my mom still cares about me and that she is safe. I have a more calm life when I know that my brothers and sisters are fine. Some of the happiest times in my life have been seeing my birth family.”



Kim says: “It is good for kids to see how their birth families are doing because that question will always be in their heads. I love my birth family very much and seeing them comforts me. It makes me happy to know that my younger brothers are living in a wonderful home. I felt so proud and full of love to have my mother and brother there when I walked across the stage to graduate and get my high school diploma.”



Chasity says: “Invite me to come to court more often please. I would like to know what is going on. Can you imagine knowing someone for nine years of your life and then being told that you can’t see them no more? Well, I did and it was scary for me. I would have liked to see my siblings more while I was in foster care. Now that I am adopted I get to see them more than I used to. I am thankful that my adoptive mom is open to me being in their life.”



Shantaye says: “I feel it’s important that children remain connected to their family in some way or another, whether it be their sisters and brothers or their mother or their grandmother and grandfather, and just the people—actually anybody who has ever been in their life, especially when they were young, because when it comes down to it family is all you have.”



Sandra says: “I feel like I was coerced into being adopted. For me in my situation my brothers and sisters are all I have. There are six of us, and I can go to my sisters or my brothers and it’s like everything gets fine. I can look at my sister as my mother because before we were adopted with my grandmother we were living in Minneapolis, Minnesota and she took care of us real well.”

Youth Advisors to the Family Connections Project



Jeremy says: “I am advocating for youth in foster care to have the opportunity to make the choice about who they want to stay connected to. Other people choose who they want to have relationships with and foster youth don’t get to. People act like certain relationships are forbidden. That is just not right. If your parents’ rights are terminated that means that they can’t take care of you, but it should not mean that you are not allowed to see them. No matter what the court decides they are still your mom and dad.”



April says: “I entered foster care when I was 3. When I was 13 my little sister was born, and I fought tirelessly to have visitation with her. I ended up taking on all the adults—the courts, the caseworkers, and I got one-on-one with the foster parents. Now I visit with my sister on the weekends and I had her with me for a week at college. To me, I think that’s an accomplishment to be able to maintain a bond. The happening to a lot of other families. I have made keeping families connected an important part of my life’s work.”

Moms Speak Out on Birth Family Connections



Jamelle's mom says: "Having my children see their birth parents has helped me tremendously. It has helped me a lot with Jamelle. I told his mother, as long as she's not pulling him one way and I'm pulling him the other way, we need to pull both ways together, then we can get a good boy and she'll have a good son and we'll have peace, and that's what's happening."



Basilia's mom says: "About a year after our children were placed with us, we met with their birthparents and siblings. It was a great reunion for our kids. It was great for us as adoptive parents because knowing the birthparents is much better than imagining them. With all that the mind can conjure up, the truth and reality is never as threatening as what is unknown. It seems as though immediately we established a rapport with the birthparents that was centered on the kids. It seemed right and felt natural.

Since the kids had been with us for a year already, we had enough experience parenting them to be able to share a lot with their birthparents - mostly about their habits, health, and personalities.

There is so much common ground between birthparents and adoptive parents when the focus remains on the children. In most cases, birthparents are very supportive of and grateful to adoptive parents. Rarely will they challenge boundaries because of the simple fact that they wish to continue to see their birth children.

After our first meeting with the birthparents, we were surprised and overwhelmed by the sadness and grief we experienced. Later on, we realized that what we were feeling was akin to, but not nearly as strong as, the grief of loss that our kids and their birth family felt. It is the grief of a broken and shattered family. It doesn't matter how it was broken, by what circumstance or whose fault it was. What mattered was our realization that as adoptive parents we had a great opportunity presented to us. Not only could we love and care for these kids, we could help the kids and the family to heal by staying connected. We now celebrate all of our kids' important life events with the birth family. Right now it is graduations and holidays. In the future it will be marriages and grandchildren - we hope!"



Kim and Jonathan's mom says: "I started fostering 14 years ago, and have had a total of 7 placements, 3 of whom I have adopted. All of those placements have involved visits with birth families, sometimes difficult (sometimes VERY difficult). But over time I have come to believe that I would much rather have my children see their birth family members for themselves than for me to be the "filter" or the barrier between the children and the birth family. The hardest part, though, has been trying to make sure that the visits or encounters are carried out in a safe, respectful way for all concerned. On more than one occasion I have had to be the "bad cop" insisting that visits take place in a public place; no overnight visits; I or another chaperone had to be there; long waits were not acceptable, etc. etc.

Over time, with my 3 adopted older kids, the visits have fallen into a pattern with each birth family, and while the visits are often at least somewhat uncomfortable and emotionally charged, the kids always want to do them whenever the opportunity presents itself, and they usually seem appreciative of the efforts involved in making them happen. They also seem to appreciate their stable life at home more after a birth family visit, and I have heard them say various things to confirm my instincts on that."

Information Sheet

Adoptions Unlimited, Inc.

Family Connections Project

Adoptions Unlimited, Inc. participates in a cooperative agreement with the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, in the funding priority area "Developing Adoption Services and Supports for Youth Who Wish to Retain contact with Family Members in Order to Improve Permanency Outcomes."

The Family Connections Project proposes a new model for seeking youth permanency, which emphasizes the exploration of open adoption and other permanency options for the wards of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. Major components of the project are:

- Development of a web-based openness module that will be added to the state's adoption training for permanency workers
- Development of an openness module for the continuous education of foster and adoptive families
- Development of an openness module for court and legal personnel, including a video
- Development of an openness in permanency module for youth
- Providing training for permanency and adoption preservation workers on mediation/negotiation skills for use in developing and maintaining an openness arrangement after adoption
- Partnerships with the Adoption Preservation agencies to provide support groups for the youth and adoptive families that select open permanency arrangements
- Involvement in the Child and Family Team meetings for the identified project youth where open permanency options can be negotiated with the youth, permanent family, and birth family members.
- Involvement of the DCFS Youth Advisory Boards, the DCFS Adoption Advisory Council, adoptive parents, the public guardian's legal staff, and the DCFS in the project's Permanency for Youth Workgroup.

In addition to the DCFS, the private agency partner is Lutheran Social Services of Illinois. In years four and five of the grant, the project will be implemented in the Peoria area.

The grant evaluators are Susan Smith and Jeanne Howard from Illinois State University's Center for Adoption Study. They have completed a literature review on openness in permanency arrangements, will conduct focus groups with workers, families, youth, and legal personnel to learn about the barriers to openness, and evaluate trainings.

The project plans to move 50 youth, 14 years and older, to permanency within the first three years of the grant.

Adoptions Unlimited, Inc. Background Information

Adoptions Unlimited, Inc. (AUI) is a 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization. Our goal is to find and support adoptive families for children who need permanent homes. We believe “Every Child Deserves a Loving Family.”

AUI currently operates five programs:

- In partnership with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), we administer the Adoption Information Center of Illinois (AICI).
- In partnership with the Adoption Exchange Association, we serve as the Recruitment Response Team for Illinois families who inquire about adoption and foster care as a result of the national campaign conducted by the Children’s Bureau Collaboration to AdoptUSKids.
- In partnership with Spaulding for Children, we serve as the administrator for the Infant Adoption Awareness Training Program in Illinois. This program trains health care providers to present adoption as an option to women and teens with unplanned pregnancies in an objective, non-directive way.
- We administer the Family Connections Project, whose purpose is to develop adoption services and supports for youth who wish to retain family contact in order to improve permanency outcomes. It is a federally funded, five-year cooperative agreement with the Children’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- In partnership with a group of dedicated volunteers, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, and the Office of Illinois Lt. Governor Pat Quinn, we administer the Heart Gallery of Illinois.

Closed File Information and Search Service
a program of the
Illinois Department of Children and Family Services

Illinois Department of Children and Family Service offers service to adoptees, adoptive parents, and guardians of minors and birth family members seeking information from DCFS files and/or search service. These services are also available to individuals who were under the guardianship of DCFS but were never adopted. The Department has contracted with MIDWEST ADOPTION CENTER to provide this program. There is no fee for this service.

Midwest Adoption Center
3158 South River Road – Suite 120
Des Plaines, Illinois 60018
www.macadopt.org
MAC@macadopt.org
Phone: 847-298-9096
FAX: 847-298-9097

Who may use this program?

If the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services was involved in the completion of the adoption or in the provision of foster care, there may be records within the DCFS system. The following individuals may request service:

- adopted person, (18 or over may request file information, 21 or over may request search service)
- adoptive parent(s) of a child who is under the age of 21
- guardian(s) of a child who is under the age of 18
- birth parent(s) of a child who was placed in adoption or guardianship through DCFS
- birth sibling of a person who was placed in adoption or guardianship through DCFS
- other birth relative of a person who was placed in adoption or guardianship through DCFS
- person who was a ward of DCFS but never adopted (in foster care or institutional care)
- person who was in foster care or institutional care through DCFS but never a ward
- professionals providing service to an individual party to an adoption completed through DCFS or who was under the guardianship of DCFS but never adopted

What happens after the client submits a Service Request to Midwest Adoption Center?

Within 5 – 7 business days, a letter acknowledging that we have received the SR is sent to the client. Midwest Adoption Center (MAC) then begins the process of determining

whether the client is eligible for service through this program and identifying and obtaining the DCFS files needed to provide service.

Sometimes it is clear that the client cannot be served through this program. In these instances, we contact the client – usually by phone – and refer the client to another resource. Some of the clients who are most frequently referred elsewhere are:

- Adoption completed before about 1960
- Client supplies information that adoption was through another agency or was a non-agency placement
- Client is asking for a specific service or piece of information that we cannot legally provide

In all other cases, we begin the file retrieval process. That involves using CYCIS information, the database of DCFS files in storage and an assortment of other file related resources. Because of the greatly improved file storage system now in place, we are often able to identify and order the needed files within two weeks. In other cases, files are more difficult to find as they may be at POS agencies or DCFS field offices. The most difficult cases for which to find files are those in which the client has little information to give us such as an adult adopted person who does not know his birth name or his birth mother's name.

When the necessary files have been located and obtained, we are ready to assign the case to a MAC caseworker. The client receives a letter explaining that files have been found and we are ready to begin service. If, after all resources are utilized, we are unable to find files necessary to provide service the client receives a letter explaining the situation and offering alternative referrals if possible.

What “closed file information” is given to the client?

MAC caseworkers receive extensive, on-going training regarding the provision of information from closed DCFS files to the various client types served. This can be a tedious, time-consuming process depending on how much file information is received and the complexity of the information found in the file. Great care must be taken to ensure that information the client is legally entitled to receive is included, but that information that cannot be released is not given. These ‘rules’ have been developed based on Illinois law, general privacy and confidentiality laws, and DCFS policy and procedure.

Individuals who were wards of the Department but never adopted: These clients receive a copy of their own file if it is found, with information about other individuals removed. If their own file is not found but the ‘family file’ is found, information from that file that is specifically about the client will be provided.

Individuals who were never wards but were in foster or institutional care through DCFS: Within the past several months, the Department made the decision that MAC will respond to requests for file information from these clients. The protocol is very similar to that used with never-adopted former wards.

Adult adopted persons: Illinois law specifies the information that must be provided, upon request, to adult adopted persons. In addition, MAC also provides copies of medical and

psychological reports and evaluations if the information is medically complex. Photos and other keepsake items found in the file that belong to the adopted person are also provided.

Adoptive and Guardianship parents of minors: Illinois law specifies the information that must be provided, upon request, to adoptive parents of minors. And federal regulations require that Guardianship parents be given the same service as adoptive parents. In addition, MAC also provides copies of medical and psychological reports and evaluations, as well as educational reports and developmental evaluations found in the file. Photos and other keepsake items found in the file that belong to the adopted person are also provided.

Birth parents: No information from DCFS files can be given by MAC to birth parents. If the birth parent is seeking information regarding the child's well-being after adoptive or guardianship placement, MAC will contact the child's parent and request consent to provide information to the birth parent.

What is included in 'search service'?

An individual, who was in DCFS care, whether or not he was adopted, can request help in connecting with a birth relative. Adult adopted persons are often seeking birth parents, siblings, or grandparents. Even though ties to their birth families may not have been legally broken, many former foster children also need help to locate siblings, parents, or other birth relatives. A birth relative of a former ward who was not adopted may also request search service to locate the person if TPR had occurred. If the sought after person is under 21 years of age, the outreach must be made to his adoptive or guardianship parents.

Using information found in the DCFS files and in CYCIS, MAC staff attempts to locate the sought after individual. MAC has access to several commercial database services that are instrumental in achieving our high rate of search success. In time, we are able to locate most people, although some searches can take many months. If the person is not found, is found to be deceased, or chooses to not have any connection to our client, s/he is entitled to request a search for a different relative. The goal is to make one connection for each client. Adoptive parents may request searches for as many birth relatives as they believe to be in the best interest of their child. Birth parents can request searches for each of their children placed through DCFS.

When the person is located, MAC staff attempts to facilitate whatever type of connection is comfortable for both parties. Some clients communicate anonymously through MAC before moving forward to full disclosure of their identities. Others continue to correspond anonymously indefinitely. In a smaller number of cases, the found relative declines any kind of connection. Some found relatives who decline contact do share, through the worker, an update on their life or family medical information to be given to the initiating client.

How long does it take? *(time frames as of January 2007)*

Service request received, files located, case assigned: typically within 6 - 8 weeks

Case assignment, closed file information prepared by MAC caseworker, information sent to client: 4 – 6 weeks.

Client completes request for search service, completion of search: from 3 or 4 months to a year. While a year-long search is not the norm, some do take that long to complete – not as a result of a lack of staff time, but rather that it is a difficult search and we want to be sure all possible resources are explored.

Making Referrals to MAC

What do MAC clients typically ask for when they first call?

- I was in the system and want to find my sister/brother/aunt/grandparent/parent.
- I was 'taken away' by the state and want my file.
- My child was 'taken away'. I think she was adopted and she's now an adult. I am trying to find her.
- My adopted child is 9 and is having a lot of problems. I need to know more about the birth family.
- My child was adopted. The new parents said they would let me know how she's doing but I haven't heard from them for years and they've moved.
- My adopted child is 13 and keeps asking about his brother. I think he was adopted. Is there any way that I can find out where he is and maybe contact him?
- I took care of my grandson until he was 5 and then he was taken by DCFS. We all want to find him now that he's an adult.
- I was adopted when I was 4. I don't know whether DCFS was involved. I want to find my birthmother.
- I am having health problems and want my medical history. I was adopted in 1962.
- I am a social worker/therapist/physician and am trying to obtain information concerning my client/patient in order to provide treatment.
- I was in an orphanage downstate in 1938. I was told the state has my file. (DCFS does hold some records of a few orphanages or children's homes dating back to the 1930's.)

What kinds of calls come to MAC that we must refer on to another resource?

- I need to get a copy of my original birth certificate. I was in foster care in DCFS. (MAC cannot give copies of DPH documents. Refer to DPH.)
- My child was taken away by DCFS. I want a copy of the report that was made about me. (MAC cannot give any file material to birth parents. Refer to State Central Register.)
- I was a ward of DCFS and am trying to get financial aid for college. I need proof. (MAC could give the client a copy of his own file, but what he probably needs is a letter/statement from DCFS verifying that he was a ward during a certain period of time. Referral to DCFS legal services.)
- I am an attorney and have a court order or subpoena for a file of a person who was a ward. (MAC does not respond to any requests from attorneys or courts. Referral to DCFS Legal Services.)

- I am an adoptee/adoptive parent / birth relative; the adoption was private or completed through a private agency, not DCFS. (Referral to the CI program and/or to the private agency if known.)

NAIC Publication
“Openness in Adoption: A Fact Sheet for Families”

This 6 page publication is available at no charge from the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse and can also be printed directly from their website at

http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadopt.pdf

Ordering information as well as much additional information on open adoption is available at that site as well.

Appendix C Participant Materials

Implementation Suggestions Form

Sample Schedules

Implementation Suggestions

Implementation Suggestions: Judges

Facilitators: Judge _____

Youth _____

Family Connections Project Staff _____

1. How does preservation of ongoing connections for foster youth moving to permanency relate to the mission of the juvenile court judge?

2. What are the challenges to maintaining relationships of young adults in foster care to relatives and significant others?

3. What can a juvenile court judge do to make ongoing connections more possible for youth moving to permanency?

Implementation Suggestions: Hearing Officers

Facilitators: Hearing Officer _____

Youth _____

Family Connections Project Staff _____

1. How does preservation of ongoing connections for foster youth moving to permanency relate to your mission as a hearing officer?

2. What are the challenges to maintaining relationships of young adults in foster care to relatives and significant others?

3. What can a juvenile court hearing officer do to make ongoing connections more possible for youth moving to permanency?

Implementation Suggestions - Attorney Offices at Juvenile Court Office

Facilitators: Attorney _____

Youth _____

Family Connections Project Staff _____

- 1. How does preservation of ongoing connections for foster youth moving to permanency relate to your office mission?

- 2. What are the challenges to maintaining relationships of young adults in foster care to relatives and significant others?

- 3. What can your office do to make ongoing connections more possible for youth moving to permanency?

- 4. What can you as an individual attorney do to make ongoing connections more possible for youth moving to permanency?

Sample Schedule Judge and Hearing Officers

Location: Presiding Judge's Office

- 11:30-12:30 Lunch – meet facilitating judge and hearing officer: Run through format with them during lunch.
- 12:30 sharp Start program
- 12:30-12:35 Presiding judge: Introduction to project and training – 5 minutes
- 12:35-12:45 Youth panelist: “In My Shoes” a guided exploration of the importance of connections – 15 min
- 12:45-1:05 Presiding judge:
 - What are ongoing connections? -5 minutes
 - Ongoing connections as a tool in the permanency plan–15 minutes
- 1:05 -1:20 Youth video*
- 1:20-1:50 Youth panel – 30 minutes – This allows each of 8 presenters to speak for 3 minutes
At the conclusion of the panel:
youth and those not participating in discussion groups attend the 2:00 presentation.
hearing officers attend small group sessions.
- 1:50-2:00 Judge makes implementation suggestions (recorded by convener). If time is available, judge and hearing officers meet at 2:30 for a report back by the convening facilitators – with a closure and thank you by the project director.

* In the event that there is no video, the same program will be followed with 20 minutes allotted for the small group discussion and 10 minutes for a report back involving the judges and the hearing officers.

Sample Schedule

Presentation for Attorney Offices
Office of the Public Guardian (OPG)
Office of the Public Defender (OPD)
Office of the State's Attorney (OSA)
Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS)

Start program 2:00 sharp*.

- 2:00-2:05 Presiding judge: Introduction to project and training – 5 minutes
- 2:05-2:20 Youth panelist: “In My Shoes” a guided exploration of the importance of connections – 15 min
- 2:20-2:40 Presiding judge:
• What are ongoing connections? -5 minutes
• Ongoing connections as a tool in the permanency plan–15 minutes
- 2:40 -3:00 Youth Video**
- 3:00-3:30 Youth panel – 30 minutes – This allows each of 8 presenters to speak for 3 minutes
- 3:30-3:45 Small groups on implementation – managed by FCP Project Director and presiding judge
DCFS – 2-3 youth, one staff member
Office of the Public Guardian – 2-3 youth, one staff member
Office of the Public Defender – 2-3 youth, one staff member
- 3:45-3:55 Report back – 3 small groups at 3 minutes each
- 3:55-4:00 Presiding judge - closing

Thank the youth, give them their thank you letters and checks and bid them farewell.

* Starting exactly on time might be difficult, but it is important to do so even if the room is somewhat bare. Attendees who arrive later can get the introductory information from the handouts, but there might not be another opportunity to meet with the youth.

** In the event that there is no video, the same program will be followed with a little more time for the youth panel. If youth panel does not require additional time, allot 20 minutes for the small group discussion and more time for the report back. It would be unlikely to have the problem of too much time.

Sample Schedule

Family Connections Youth Panel Schedule

5 Weeks before Presentation

4 hours Youth meet to get to know one another, prepare for panel, and have pictures taken..

3 Weeks before Presentation

Video individual youth, decide on photos and finalize youth narratives.

Presentation Day

10-4 Meet at conference location. Provide all attendees in advance in writing the address and any transportation information

10:00 Panelists arrive

11:30 - 12:30 Lunch with presiding judge

12:30 – 2:00 Presentation to judges and hearing officers

2:00 – 4:00 Presentation to attorneys from the Juvenile Court:
Office of the Public Guardian, Office of the Public Defender,
Office of the State’s Attorney and the DCFS Office of Legal Services.

If room is large enough, families of the presenting youth are welcome to attend this session.

**Appendix D
Lay the Foundation
The Cook County Experience**

Legal Subcommittee

Meeting #1

Meeting #2

Meeting #3

Meeting #4

**Final Memo to the Legal Subcommittee Regarding the Work Accomplished
Prior to the Ongoing Connections Presentation**

The Cook County Project

The Cook County project had a Legal Subcommittee that was part of the Family Connections Work Group. The Legal Subcommittee met four times – February 2, February 23, March 8, and April 21. The work accomplished by this committee is set out in detail below.

By the end of the fourth meeting the representatives of the attorney offices understood the purpose and message of the event and had reviewed and amended the curriculum, identified the participants, and agreed that their office will make and implement recommendations regarding how they can help to achieve our common goal. There will be one session for all judges and hearing officers, a total of about forty, and a separate session for about seventy representatives of attorney offices. A judge has agreed to conduct the opening and closing segments for both events.

Meetings of the Legal Subcommittee of the Family Connections Work Group and a summary of decisions made at each meeting follow:

Meeting #1 – February 2, 2006

Attendance: Representatives of all attorney offices – Office of the Public Guardian (OPG), Office of Legal Services (OLS) for DCFS, ASA, and assistant director of Family Connections – no judge in attendance

Summary of the meeting:

- a. Introduction of the project and the concept of the training
- b. Request assistance in shaping a training that fits the needs of this court
- c. Quick agreement that the court personnel are most interested in hearing directly from youth
- d. Learn attendees' position regarding the subject philosophically, legally, and with implementation issues
- e. Estimate the number of participants from each office
- f. Set training dates
- g. After meeting, secure location to train based on potential number of attendees

Note: A Round Robin plan for implementation ideas was suggested at meeting #1. It was a complete dud – no one ever participated. Concrete implementation proposals were being encouraged too early, requiring more work than the group had committed to yet.

Family Connections Legal Subgroup Round Robin

Please add at least one recommendation for how any group that works at Juvenile Court can help to create and support lifelong connections for older youth with their birth families that will sustain after the youth exits care. Brainstorm. This list is just for us, we can edit later. Add something and send it out to the rest of the group. Note at the end of your suggestion which group or groups you think could implement your recommendation.

1. Ask about relative connections
 - If yes, in a family or independent placement:
 - Are they meeting?
 - Is there a visiting plan?
 - Is it part of the service plan?
 - If yes, in a group home or residential placement:
 - Are the youth and relative able to make phone contact easily?
 - Is the relative approved as a visiting resource?
 - If no:
 - What have they done to reach out?

- What about using the Diligent Search Service Center to locate a supportive relative?
2. Clarify the legal status of ongoing relationships – not enforceable, but nothing illegal about making a plan to stay in touch.

Meeting #2 – February 23, 2006

Attendance: Similar to that of Meeting #1. No judge present.

Summary of the meeting:

- a. Review of the basic curriculum drafted for project use, which was circulated earlier.
- b. Discussion about the objectives of the training, how they apply to the court, and the relevant law. The history of attempts at open adoption in Illinois was reviewed, and the need to clarify the distinction between legality and legal enforceability – that although open adoption is not.
- c. Determination that the term “open adoption” should not be used in the presentation as it is too inflammatory and would detract from achievement of the educational goal.
- d. Discussion of identification and preparation of youth, and what questions the audience would most want the youth perspective on. A list of questions was prepared for our youth advisors – two young people recently out of care.
- e. A rough outline of the presentation drawn up.

Meeting #3 - March 8, 2006

Partial attendance:

Summary of the meeting:

- a. Determined that presentation would have most impact if there was judicial participation.
- b. Determined what attendees most wanted to hear from the youth:
 - i. Why ongoing contact is or is not important to them.
 - ii. What it feels like to be in their shoes in terms of having to leave important people behind.
- c. Recommendation made by youth advisor that the youth be paid for their participation, and that they be chosen in part for their ability to be articulate and sensitive to the issues in a way that is appropriate to the audience that they are addressing.
- d. Goal set for three youth to present:
 - i. One in care with siblings who have been adopted
 - ii. One adopted with ongoing contact
 - iii. One adopted without contact

Up to 12 youth would be identified to cover the possibility of change of plans between identification and the event.

- e. Youth to be sought through the OPG, the DCFS Adoption Advisory Committee, DCFS scholarship winners, and personal contacts.
- f. Determination that the program should include time for break out into small groups by office to make recommendations on how that office can contribute to the realization of the goal of ongoing connection for youth in care. State's attorney representative says that her office cannot participate in this as they have no clients, can only contribute in the sense that they work in the best interest of the child. All other offices agree to participate.
- g. A list of questions for the break-out groups is drawn up. It is agreed that the list of responses will serve to gauge the attitude of the court and to form a common plan to work toward ongoing connections for kids:
 - i. How does preservation of ongoing connections for foster youth moving to permanency relate to your office mission?
 - ii. What are the challenges to maintaining relationships of young adults in foster care with relatives and significant others?
 - iii. What can you do to make ongoing connections possible for youth moving to permanency?
 - (a) As an office
 - (b) As an individual attorney, hearing officer, or judge

Each group will do a 3 minute or less report back to the large group.

- h. Needed from Meeting #4 to wind up the work of the Legal Subcommittee:
 - i. Name of facilitator for the implementation break-out group from each office
 - ii. Suggestions on the role each office will play in making this happen for kids
 - iii. List of those who will attend
 - iv. Approval on a follow-through plan
 - v. Judicial participation in the presentation if possible

Meeting #4 - April 21, 2006

Attendance: Judge present at the end of the meeting.

Summary of the meeting:

- a. Judge Thomas agrees to present the training.
- b. Attorney office representatives agree to name an attorney to act as small-group facilitator and one to act as small-group recorder. They will also send a list of attending attorneys. Because of space limitations only supervisors and above may attend.
- c. A plan is made for the small-group facilitators to report back on the presentation to their colleagues at an office meeting and to present the implementation recommendations that the attending supervisors have made for the office.
- d. Dates are confirmed.
- e. Follow-through plan discussed. (see below)
- f. Without names of facilitators or implementation suggestions, the Legal Subcommittee nevertheless ends its work and the program coordinator begins to focus on the task of identifying and listening to the youth.

Final Memo to the Legal Subcommittee Regarding the Work Accomplished Prior to the Ongoing Connections Presentation

Family Connections Project
Juvenile Court Training
Summary of Legal Subgroup Work as of April 23, 2006

Training Goal: To change attitudes and open minds to the value of maintaining ongoing connections to family of origin and important others for youth in need of permanence.

Dates: Target dates July 12 and August 9

Faculty: Judge Sybil Thomas and youth panel for judicial audience, possibly for both

Attending: Two sessions, one for each audience described below:

- Judges and hearing officers
- Supervisor level and higher from each of the attorney offices – committee members and youth panel parents

Curriculum outline:

- Introduction to the Family Connections project – 2 minutes
- Introduction to this training – 3 minutes
- Guided exploration of family connections-YOUTH – 15 minutes
- What are ongoing connections? – 5 minutes
- Ongoing connections as a tool in the permanency plan for youth – 15 minutes
- Youth panel – 30 minutes
- Relationship to your work – implementation recommendations – 30 min
 - Attorney training divided by office
 - Judicial training divided into small groups
- Report back and closing remarks – 20 minutes

Relevant court/legal developments:

- DSSC now has enhanced capacity to search for relatives
- HB 4242 regarding placement of foster youth with relatives is moving through the legislature and may well be law by the time that we train.

Appendix E The Voice of the Youth

Overview

Identify the Youth

Letter #1 to Identified Youth

Questionnaire with Youth Responses

Letter #2 to Identified Youth

Developing Your Story

Help the Youth Prepare Their Message: Youth Panel Meeting #1

Youth Stories

The Voice of the Youth Overview

Give Youth the Best Forum Possible

Early in the project, before the youth were even identified, our youth advisors spoke loud and clear about the need to prepare the youth well and to give them a setting in which they could shine. Too many times they had seen adults well prepared and compensated and youth expected just to volunteer their opinion or experience on the spot.

Paying youth for their time is an important part of the process. The youth on our panel gave up three Saturdays – one to meet, one to shoot the video, and one to present to the court. In addition, they took the time to write their stories and practice them. Some practiced at home with their families, others met with the training coordinator to practice individually. The compensation of \$150 each, based on \$50 for each of the Saturday sessions, was important to these young people not only for what it could buy them but perhaps even more for the dignity that it gave to their participation

The decision to create a video of the youth was a great addition to the project. It guaranteed that they would have a good presentation to offer. If youth were unable to attend or too nervous to participate, their point of view would be given a good showcase on film. Other jurisdictions can profit from this by using the film as well.

The video is effective and it can stand alone. It is no competition, however, for a well prepared youth explaining the impact of court and agency practice on his life – either cutting him off from the people who have been close to him since he was a little child or making it possible for him to be with them.

At the end of the presentation day, each participant was given a letter of thanks and a copy of the video. They were asked if they would like to meet with the attorney offices if the video were to be presented in each office so that all attorneys could see it. Each of the young men and women said yes, they would like to continue on in this work. Giving these young people an opportunity to be heard and to realize the power of their stories was an important outcome of the project. Foster youth across the nation would benefit from the chance to tell their story to the decision makers in their lives.

Work of Legal Committee updated after meeting with youth advisor April Curtis on April 6, 2006

Panel of 3 youth:

- a. In care, with sibs who have been adopted
- b. Adopted with ongoing contact
- c. Adopted without ongoing contact

What we would like to learn:

- a. Why ongoing contact is or is not important to them
- b. What it feels like to be in their shoes in terms of leaving important people behind

Proposed questions for the youth to respond to:

- a. Times in their lives when they would have liked to be able to contact someone and were unable to – why not and what that was like.

- b. Times when they were able to make or retain contact with someone important to them and why that was important to them – what they did, what they shared, the impact on their lives of the continuing relationship.

Identification of participating youth:

- a. We seek 4 youth for each of the three panel positions to cover two sessions, taking into consideration the possibility that youth' plans may change over the summer, etc.
- b. Ask attorneys for recommendations of appropriate youth
- c. Youth leader will consider youth in her programs for participation
- d. Contact the Adoption Advisory Committee for recommendations, and explore a request for volunteers among the DCFS scholarship winners.
- e. Permission from DCFS Guardianship Administrator needed for any youth under 18

Preparation of participating youth:

- a. Individual initial introduction to project – telephone or in person
- b. 2 planning meetings – one in May and one in June
- c. Work with youth on format of their presentation, structuring it to reflect experience with the court and expectations of the court and to have an overall positive effect without altering the truth of the youth's experience
- d. If video is to be made, consideration of when this is best done
- e. Consideration of using same youth panel for Peoria presentation rather than a video

Youth consultants to the committee have expressed the following concerns:*

- a. Youth be paid for their participation – 2 prep meetings, presentation, transportation, lunch on the day of
- b. Youth be chosen by social and academic skills to assure that they are articulate and sensitive to the issues in a way that is appropriate to the audience that they are addressing
- c. Youth be adequately prepared to present in the most effective manner possible, framing their presentation in a legal context and embedding concrete recommendations applicable to the audience in their remarks

* We tried our best to meet their concerns. Youth were paid and adequately prepared. They were not chosen by social and academic skills; we worked with all youth who expressed an interest. Because they were interested and we all worked together, the product was a success.

Identify the Youth

Two young people who had recently aged out of foster care acted as youth advisors for the project. They were with us from the beginning. They had been active members of the DCFS Statewide Youth Advisory Board.

We searched far and wide for youth panelists who had a message they wanted to deliver and were available at the time and place that we needed them. Many young people were interested but had to be in school or at work or were living too far from the court to make participation feasible. Still we ended up with as many youth as we could accommodate and all of them did a good job. Although we had expected that some youth would drop out, only one young woman that we worked with was not able to be present on the day of the presentation and that was because she had not fully recovered from oral surgery. The youth in our experience were willing, able, and reliable.

Our search for other panel members was more extensive than it needed to be. We asked DCFS adoption workers to refer clients, attorneys for children were notified of the search, letters were sent to DCFS scholarship youth known to be adopted, and we all kept our ears to the ground.

The resulting panel came to us largely through long-standing relationships or from in-depth conversations in which the parent or youth could get a clear read of the position and intention of the adult organizing this event. One was the child of a Family Connections Work Group member, two were referred by the representative of attorney offices on our Legal Committee (the Office of the Public Defender and the Office of the Public Guardian), one was related to one of our youth advisors, and three were asked by staff members who met the youth or their mothers in the course of their work.

For example, at a foster parent support meeting, Mrs. S began to talk about the relationship between her four birth children and four adopted children. Her adopted children came to her as foster children, and she worked with their birth families toward reunification. When those efforts were not successful and the court terminated parental rights, Mrs. S adopted the children.

Hearing this story, I sought out Mrs. S after the meeting to discuss our project. She was immediately interested. Although all of her adoptive children have contact with their birth families, she felt that her son Jamelle would be best suited to participate on the panel. He came to her at age 6 from living with a great-aunt. His mother was incarcerated. She would take him to visit her in prison. Now she is out and is doing ok. Jamelle visits her on the weekends. The two mothers keep in touch, and Mrs. S often enlists the birth mother's cooperation in helping to keep Jamelle focused on a task or aware of a responsibility. She feels that they work well together in this way.

The wider search resulted in a number of responses from youth who identified with the issues but were not able to attend, but only the personal outreach resulted in participating panel members.

Letter #1 to Identified Youth

Letters were sent to all youth who were identified as potential panelists. The purpose of the project, the work involved, and the compensation were described. Interested youth were asked to complete a preliminary questionnaire. The questionnaire gives a snapshot of the youth experience and feelings about ongoing connections. It also gave a voice to youth who were interested but not able to participate. Finally, it helped to gauge the balance of the panel for permanency experiences, age, sex, and race. The letter sent to potential panelists is set out below, followed by a table of responses to the questionnaire sent in by the youth who participated.

May 2, 2006

Dear _____,

We need to hear from you. Please take a minute to tell us what you think. .

DCFS is participating in a project called Family Connections. This project is about whether it is important for youth to be able to remain in contact with birth families and others who are important to them as they move from foster care into adoption or guardianship or out into the world on their own.

An important activity of the Family Connections project is to let the judges and attorneys at the Juvenile Courts hear the voice of former foster youth in regard to ongoing relationships with brothers and sisters, grandparents, parents, and other people who have played an important part in your life.

A panel of youth will present their thoughts to the court. Panel members will be videotaped so that their stories can be presented to other courts as well. Participation in this project would involve three days of your time – two Saturdays—June 3 and 17 and the presentation to judges and attorneys at the Juvenile Court on July 12. You will be paid an honorarium of \$150 for full participation in the project, whether you are a panel member or participate in another way.

A brief questionnaire is attached. Please complete this questionnaire and return it to us in the coming week. If you do not want to participate in the project we are still interested in hearing what you have to say. You do not have to put your name on the questionnaire. Please do let us know your age and if you are male or female.

If you are interested in participating in the project, or in sharing your views on this topic in another way, sign your name to the survey questionnaire and include a contact telephone number and the best time to reach you, along with your e-mail address if you have one. Feel free to call me at the number below with any questions.

Thank you for completing the questionnaire and returning it to us by _____. Thank you also for considering further participation with the Family Connections project. We wish you the best in your continuing work at school and in all that you do.

Questionnaire with Youth Responses

1. How has seeing your siblings impacted on your life?

Youth	Age	M/F	Status	Relative?	Comment
1	16	F	A	Think not	It has made my life great.
2	19	F	A	Yes	I have a little sister who lives with my mother who I see regularly, and 3 brothers who stay with relatives that I can see but I am very busy and find it hard to make arrangements to see them. I also have one brother who was not adopted by relatives and I don't know where he is. I hope to find him one day.
3	18	F	A	Think not	It's good to have a relationship with my sister.
4	21	F	Former SG	Yes – SG	No sibs.
5	19	M	SG	Think so	No sibs who do not live with him.
6	15	M	A	No	It lets me know that my family cares.
7	21	M	I	NA	Seeing my sibs has allowed me closure and fullness.
8	18	F	A	N	It has made it less stressful knowing that they are doing good and living in a safe home. (sees sibs regularly)
9	14	M	A	N	I have a more calm life because I know that they are fine. (sees sibs but not regularly)

2. How has seeing your parents impacted your life?

Youth	Age	M/F	Status	Relative?	Comment
1	16	F	A	Think not	It has made it easier.
2	19	F	A	Yes	My mother and I are very close and seeing her regularly has been a positive contribution to my life. She encourages me to be the best.
3	18	F	A	Think not	Has not seen parents.
4	21	F	Former SG	Yes	Parents are your parents regardless. Their opinions and views are still important and impact my life. If both of my parents feel something isn't right for me then I consider their feelings. They offer good advice in situations and are good listeners. I am a college student and I know that if I need an emergency babysitter I can count on either one of them. Basically people are people and are allowed to make mistakes. NO one is perfect. Maybe my parents were not there for me before, but that was the past and they are correcting it now.
5	19	M	SG	Think so	It really doesn't. It's just nice to see them.
6	15	M	A	No	Seeing my parents helps me stop worrying about how they would be and if they were okay.
7	21	M	I	NA	Has not seen them.
8	18	F	A	N	I do not have as many questions and am continually reminded how lucky I am to have the life that I am living now. (sees Mom occasionally, Dad not at all)
9	14	M	A	N	I know that she cares about me and that she is safe. (Has seen mo only, not regularly)

3. How has seeing other relatives impacted your life?

Youth	Age	M/F	Status	Relative?	Comment
1	16	F	A	Think not	Sees aunt and cousins regularly. Seeing them has made my life easier.
2	19	F	A	Yes	Sees aunts, uncles, cousins etc, all on mother's side, regularly. "I was fortunate that my maternal grandmother adopted me so that I am able to have a relationship with my biological family. Having access to my relatives gives me a sense of belonging and support.
3	18	F	A	Think not	Has not seen them.
4	21	F	Former SG	Yes	Sees all of her relatives, but not regularly because of where they live. "I mean it is important because family is important. I have a 1 year old son and I want him to know his family and where his mother gets her strength from. Also me seeing them helps me keep up with what's going on in their lives so that I can offer advice or vice-versa."
5	19	M	SG	Think so	Sees all of them. "They are good for moral and sports support."
6	15	M	A	No	Regularly sees grandmother, uncles, cousins, and aunts. "It makes me feel comfortable about everything."
7	21	M	I	NA	
8	18	F	A	N	Knowing that I am still connected to my birth family. (Sees cousins at school.)
9	14	M	A	N	It shows me another way of life. (Sees cousins and nephews as well as sibs and mom.)

4. Have you seen people other than relatives, such as foster parents? If so, how has this impacted your life?

Youth	Age	M/F	Status	Relative?	Comment
1	16	F	A	Think not	Has not seen others.
2	19	F	A	Yes	Says question does not apply as she was adopted by her biological grandparents.
3	18	F	A	Think not	Saw foster parents regularly before they died. "My foster parents were the closest thing that I have ever had in my life. I think that it was all about the way they handled the situation because they tried to teach me to make my own decisions."
4	21	F	SG	Yes	Has not seen others.
5	19	M	SG	Think so	Has not seen others.
6	15	M	A	No	Has not seen others. (Was adopted by foster parents.)
7	21	M	I	NA	Has not seen others.
8	18	F	A	N	Has not seen others.
9	14	M	A	N	Sees "My foster/adopted Mom." She brought me into her family.

5. Comments for DCFS or the Juvenile Court.

Youth	Age	M/F	Status	Relative?	Comment
1	16	F	A	Think not	I think that it will be great for the children to see their families.
2	19	F	A	Yes	I know that it is hard sometimes to find relatives to adopt children whose parents are unable to care for them but it is the best option. Having my family around was essential to my growth and motivation to strive for excellence.
3	18	F	A	Think not	My foster parents were always very understanding and wanted my sister and I to keep contact with each other, but only if we wanted it. It helps when you don't have people around you who want to make the decision for you or push you into the decision.
4	21	F	Former SG	Yes	Family is important in every aspect. They offer valuable advice and siblings tend to listen to people who are closer to them. I have a little brother who will consider my thoughts on situations above anyone else's opinion. That shows me that I am valued and that shows him that I care enough to listen and advise. Sometimes hearing opinions of someone you love really hits hard and changes people in a positive way. Family always want the best for one another and the best is important to conserve.
5	19	M	SG	Think so	It is important and I suggest that all children need to see them.
6	15	M	A	No	This is a good idea because the child would not grow up worried about their birth parents. Also this is good because now they can have two big families. So that's twice the gifts on your birthday.
7	21	M	I	NA	This project allows many youth the opportunity to have long term biological family connections. This can be one of the best relationships a youth can have and should be fostered in any positive situation. The best interest of the child is supposed to be the most important. Let's start acting like it.
8	18	F	A	N	I have learned over the years that things happen for a reason, and I should be grateful for what I have. I love my birth family very much and seeing them comforts me and my questions I may have.
9	14	M	A	N	Left blank.

Here are some sample quotes from responses from youth who were unable to participate in the project, usually because of schedule conflicts.

Sharde says

“I know that it is hard sometimes to find relatives to adopt children whose parents are unable to care for them but it is the best option. Having my family around was essential to my growth and motivation to strive for excellence.”

Marilyn says

“My foster parents were always very understanding and wanted my sister and I to keep contact with each other, but only if we wanted it. It helps when you don’t have people around you who want to make the decision for you or push you into the decision.”

LaJanice says

“Basically people are people and are allowed to make mistakes. No one is perfect. Maybe my parents were not there for me before, but that was the past and they are correcting it now.”

Chadd says

“Seeing my parents really doesn’t impact on my life. It’s just nice to see them. It is important and I suggest that all children need to see them.”

Letter #2 to Identified Youth

Youth who responded to the letter with completed questionnaires and said that they were interested in participating in the project were sent a second letter.

The second letter to the youth contained a five-part form called Developing Your Story along with a first meeting date. The form was sent to get them thinking about their story and to give them a head start on writing it down. It was to provide the basis for their panel presentation.

We wanted youth to know from the start that they were not intended to repeat a script that we had written or to deliver a preordained message; we wanted to hear their stories. The second letter and the Developing Your Story form are below.

Dear _____,

We are so happy that you are interested in the Family Connections project presentation to the Juvenile Court. Thank you for returning your questionnaire.

Participation in this project involves three days of your time. Two days are at locations in downtown Chicago, the third is at the Juvenile Court at Roosevelt and Ogden just west of the downtown area. The dates and times are:

Saturday, June 3, 10:00-2:00 at Adoptions Unlimited, 120 W. Madison 8th floor, Chicago.
Saturday, June 17, video shoot at the Hilton Garden and Inn at 10 East Grand Avenue,
Wednesday, July 12, 10:00-4:00 at Cook County Juvenile Court.

You are welcome to come to the first session to learn more about the project. Attendance at the first session is required to participate in the second session video shoot and/or the third session presentation to the court.

At the first session we will work together on developing statements or presentations for the court. The content of your statement is completely up to you. "Developing Your Story" is attached to this e-mail. It is a format to help you begin thinking about what you want to say and how to say it. It provides an outline for introducing yourself and giving your audience some insight into who you are and why you think the way that you do.

Please fill it out and return it to me via the enclosed envelope if there is time. If you have already returned it by e-mail, there is of course no need to do it again. If you would prefer to receive it by e-mail, just send your e-mail address to peggy Slater@msn.com and I will send it off to you.

If you send it in, we will have it waiting here for you on June 3. If you are not able to come on that date, we will request your permission to give your written comments to the court. You will have a chance to change them, and we won't let anyone read them without your permission.

You will be paid \$50 if you attend only the first session, \$100 if you attend two sessions, and \$150 if you attend all three sessions. Lunch will be provided for all sessions and you will get the chance to meet some great people, have a good time, and do important

work that will benefit kids who are still in foster care. We look forward to hearing from you.

DEVELOPING YOUR STORY

1 **Who am I?** In this section assume that the audience does not know you.

Hello my name is:

I am _____ years old.

I entered into foster care at age: _____.

I was/have been in foster care for _____ years.

I was in _____ placements.

The placements were:

Home of relative _____

Traditional foster care _____

Group home _____

Other _____

I currently live with/in: _____.

I left foster care through:

Adoption _____

Guardianship _____

Independence _____

I am still in foster care _____

I am currently enrolled in school at:

I plan to pursue a degree in:

2 **What makes you, you?** When answering this question think of your personality (strengths & weaknesses), achievements, goals, and disappointments. The purpose is to answer these questions as honestly as possible. It is very important to address all aspects of your life, both good and bad. Your answer to this question will help the judges and attorneys that you are speaking to get an accurate picture of who you are and to better understand what is important to you.

Achievements: What have you done that makes you most proud of yourself?

1.

2.

Goals: What do you hope to do in the future?

1.

2.

Personality: What are your strengths? What do you do best? What are your problem areas?

1.

2.

Happy times and disappointments: What have been some of the happiest times in your life? What has been a real disappointment for you?

1.

2.

3 Who are the people from your life before foster care who continue to be important to you today? Why? This may include your birth parents, grandparents, siblings, other relatives or people who are not actually related to you but have been an important part of your life. What impact has their continued presence or their loss had on your life? What information and details do you want to include in your story to support and explore your ideas?

1. The person or persons most important to me from my life before foster care are:

2. The person that I continue to see, or would most like to continue to see, is:

3. The reason that this person is important to me is:

4. This person has been a help to me in this way:

5. An example of a time that I was really happy to be with (or would really have liked to have been with) this person is:

3a As you thought about what to write down on the section above, is there something that you have always wanted to say but have not been able to? Can you write it down here?

4 What advice do you have for the people listed below about how important it is to foster youth, and for youth leaving foster care, to continue their relationships with birth families and other people who are important to them?

Youth:

Foster parents:

Adoptive parents or Guardians:

Caseworkers:

Lawyers:

Judges:

Help the Youth Prepare Their Message: Youth Panel Meeting #1

Panel youth met together twice prior to the presentation day. The first meeting was held on a Saturday five weeks before the target presentation date, a four hour meeting at the office with lunch provided.

The goals were to get to know one another, to hear others' experiences, to practice telling stories, to get pictures taken, and to discuss the video to be made for this project. All of these goals were accomplished.

None of the youth mailed us a copy of Developing Your Story as the letter had requested. Most of them, however, arrived at the meeting with a nearly completed document in hand, which helped the day to go as planned. They were given the following agenda for the meeting. The youth consultants did a great job setting the tone and putting the young people at ease, and project staff worked with the young panelists one to one on putting their stories down on paper and then telling them. We were able to wind up the day with two trial panel presentations.

June 3 Youth Panel Meeting

Objectives: Get to know one another - Understand the project and the youth panel
Develop presentations - Take pictures of youth - Make appointments for video

Staff: Marilyn Panichi – Director, Adoptions Unlimited
Margaret Burke – Project Director
Rose Love – Assistant Project Director
Peggy Slater – Project Coordinator for Juvenile Court

Youth Consultants: April Curtis – Family Connections Advisory Board member
Jeremy Harvey – Statewide Youth Advisory Board member

Beverly Price – Owner of the award winning Beverly Price Co. film/video production company.

Beverly is our videographer for this project!

AGENDA

- | | | |
|------|--|---------------|
| I. | Welcome and introductions. | 10:00 – 10:10 |
| II. | The Family Connections Project | 10:10 – 10:45 |
| III. | BREAK - Get your picture taken. | 10:45 – 11:00 |
| III. | Developing Your Story | |
| | WRITING | 11:00 -11:45 |
| | Work in pairs or small groups –dictate to a staff member or write on your own. | |

READING	11:45 – 12:00
Read what you have written to a new person – someone who hasn't worked on it with you. New person asks questions. Make any changes you would like. Circle your "writing paragraph" – the most important thing in your story. Be sure to include this in your telling.	
LUNCH	12:00 – 12:45
TELLING	12:45 – 1:00
Switch to a new partner. This time try to tell your story, using the written paper as a reminder as much as you need to.	
MOCK PANEL(s)	1:00 – 1:45
All youth tell their stories to the whole group.	
IV. WRAP –UP	1:45 – 2:00

Moms talk too:

The meeting was a great success. We did get to know one another and many stories were told. Although they had not specifically been invited, adoptive mom's attended the first meeting and were full participants in the discussion. Here are some of the youth and adoptive moms who attended meeting number one, and some of the things that they had to say. The mom's comments are recorded at greater length here. You can read the youths' full stories at the end of this appendix.



Jamelle said:

"Not knowing your birth mother and father is like having a cut in your heart. You go to bed at night and wake up in the morning thinking about them."



Jamelle's mom said:

"Having my children see their birth parents has helped me tremendously. It has helped me a lot with Jamelle. I told his mother, as long as she's not pulling him one way and I'm pulling him the other way, we need to pull both ways together, then we can get a good boy and she'll have a good son and we'll have peace, and that's what's happening. My other son's birth family visits are much more erratic. We haven't had one for several years, and he is the only one of seven sibs that didn't eventually go back with the birthmother. However, despite

the mixed emotions, he is very eager to resume visits if possible and has tried to re-connect with them (with my help) but, so far, without success.”



Basilia said:

“It makes me feel safe to see my birth parents—to know that they are there and that they are o.k.”



Basilia's mom said:

About a year after our children were placed with us, we met with their birthparents and siblings. It was a great reunion for our kids. It was great for us as adoptive parents because knowing the birthparents is much better than imagining them. With all that the mind can conjure up, the truth and reality is never as threatening as what is unknown. It seems as though immediately, we established a rapport with the birthparents that was centered around the kids. It seemed right and felt natural.

Since the kids had been with us for a year already, we had enough experience parenting them to be able to share a lot with their birthparents - mostly about their habits, health and personalities.

There is so much common ground between birthparents and adoptive parents when the focus remains on the children. In most cases, birthparents are very supportive of and grateful to adoptive parents. Rarely will they challenge boundaries because of the simple fact that they wish to continue to see their birth children.

After our first meeting with the birthparents, we were surprised and overwhelmed by the sadness and grief we experienced. Later on, we realized that what we were feeling was akin to but not nearly as strong as the grief of loss that our kids and their birth family felt. It is the grief of a broken and shattered family. It doesn't matter how it was broken, by what circumstance or whose fault it was. What mattered was our realization that as adoptive parents we had a great opportunity presented to us. Not only could we love and care for these kids, we could help the kids and the family to heal by staying connected.



Kim says:

“It is good for kids to see how their birth families are doing because it is a question that will always be in their heads. I love my birth family very much and seeing them comforts me.”



Jonathan says:

“My advice to youth is to convince the people who won’t let you to allow you to see your birth family because it will help you a lot.”



Kim and Jonathan’s mom tells her story:

I started fostering 14 years ago, and have had a total of 7 placements, 3 of whom I have adopted. All of those placements have involved visits with birth families, sometimes difficult (sometimes VERY difficult) but over time I have come to believe that I would much rather have my children see their birth family members for themselves than for me to be the “filter” or the barrier between the children and the birth family. The hardest part, though, has been trying to make sure that the visits or encounters are carried out in a safe, respectful way for all concerned. On more than one occasion I have had to be the “bad cop” insisting that visits take place in a public place; no overnight visits; I or another chaperone had to be there; long waits were not acceptable, etc. etc. Over time, with my 3 adopted older kids the visits have fallen into a pattern with each birth family, and while the visits are often at least somewhat uncomfortable and emotionally charged, the kids always want to do them whenever the opportunity presents itself, and they usually seem appreciative of the efforts involved in making them happen. They also seem to appreciate their stable life at home more after a birth family visit, and I have heard them say various things to confirm my instincts on that. Some of our birth family contacts are with two younger birth sibs (of my daughter and son) who have been adopted and live with their family in North Aurora. They have had a somewhat choppy course than my two (school and behavior issues, some mental health concerns) but we really enjoy the visits and I think my son and daughter would be heartbroken if they weren’t able to keep in contact with their younger brothers. They have another young brother who still lives with their birthmother, and I know that they worry about him and want to keep tabs on him, even though those visits are often awkward.”

Youth Stories

Jamelle

Hello. My name is Jamelle. I am 15 years old. I go to _____ High School and I plan to study mathematics. I like to put together everything that is new in my house: follow the instructions and build, repair, and take apart all kinds of equipment. My goal is to finish school and become an entrepreneur in technology or mathematics.

My story:

I was in foster care since the age of 2. Since then I have been in 3 different placements. The 1st was with my great grandmother, the 2nd was with my great aunt. I was taken away from her because I used to walk around at night and she claimed that I was going to do something to her so they moved me away.

The last placement was with the S family where I am also now adopted.

I have been living with the S family for 9 years. Being here has helped me understand that love is unconditional. This family took me in as one of their own and helped me to get to know my birth mother and other relatives.

Ms. S is a great mother. She used to take me and my other siblings to visit my birth mother in jail. Now she is out and I still visit her. Having two mothers alone is just magnificent. Now picture having two huge loving families.

Being in the S family made me realize how lucky I am because without them how would my life be? Would I even know my real mother? Or family? Probably not. Not knowing your birth parents is like having someone cut your heart out. It is painful to think about.

One of my happiest moments was seeing my birth mother for the first time in 4 years. She is very important to me because without her there would be no me. She talks to me a lot when I am sad and tells me how it is to be a kid, normal stuff that makes me feel better. I am very emotional and sensitive when it comes to both of my mothers because they mean the world to me.

It is a real disappointment for me not knowing who my birth father was.

My advice:

Young people-Sit with your foster parents, caseworkers, and lawyers and tell them you want to see and talk to your natural family on a regular basis.

Foster and Adoptive parents-If you don't believe the kids need to see their natural family that is wrong, because everyone has a right to know their family.

Caseworkers-Stop telling the children negative things about their natural parents. They deserve to know the truth why they were put into the foster care system and let them go to see their birth parents.

Judges and Lawyers – It is a good idea for young people in foster care to have connections with their birth family so that they do not grow up worried about their birth

parents. It is also good so that they can have two big families – and twice the gifts on your birthday!

Jonathan

Hello. My name is Jonathan C.

- I am 14 years old.
- I entered foster care when I was 6 months old.
- I have been in two placements.
- I was adopted at the age of 3.
- I go to Niles North and plan to study history.
- I am proud that I have never missed a day in Junior High School and that I got the award for being most athletic.
- I plan to go to college and to be a professional athlete or a history teacher.

This is my story:

- When I was born I was very sick because I had so many drugs in me because of my birth mom. I was in the hospital a lot.
- When I got better I went to a shelter.
- Then at the age of six months I was fostered, though I still got sick a lot.
- When I was three years old the woman that had fostered me adopted me.
- When I was six I had a visit with my birth family. Before then I had had many visits with them.
- Then after that I couldn't get in contact with them for 6 years.
- Then at the age of 12 I tracked them down. I had about 5 visits within one and a half years.
- Then I stopped having contact with them again.
- Now I am 14 and I have tried to contact my birth family but nothing so far.

I would like to continue seeing my birth family, especially my brothers and sisters. I am grateful to my birth mother because she put me up for adoption for a better life. I have had some very happy times with them, like the time that I visited them at the park. I would like to know more about my father.

I have learned a lot from what I have experienced, and this is my advice:

To young people – If people won't let you see your birth family, convince them to let you do it. It will help you a lot.

To caseworkers – Do whatever you can to put the foster kid in a good position.

To adoptive parents – Make sure that your kid knows that you love him to death.

To judges and lawyers – Try to listen to us and to be understanding.

Thank you.

Kim

Hello, my name is Kim.

- I am 18 years old.
- I entered foster care at age 6 and stayed in care for 4 years.
- I had 4 different placements.
- I am going to school at Babson College in Massachusetts in the fall.
- I plan a double major in business and accounting.
- I am proud of completing my junior year well, even though it was very stressful, and of learning from my past so that I can move forward and be proud of who I am today.
- My goal is to work for a large, successful corporation and play a key role in the world of commerce – to be the next Donald Trump.

My story:

I will just tell my story.

My birth family connections:

Mother: I see my mother occasionally. Seeing her helps me with questions that I have and I am continually reminded how lucky I am to have the life that I am living now.

Brothers: I see my birth brothers regularly and it has made it less stressful for me to know that they are doing well and are living in a safe home. It makes me happy to know that they are part of a wonderful family.

Cousins: I see my cousins at school. Having that connection with my birth family feels good.

My advice:

To youth – It's good to see how your birth family is doing, because that is a question that will always be in your head. Seeing them will settle some of your questions.

To foster and adoptive parents – If your children can see their birth families they will not ask so many questions that you cannot answer. It also lets the kids see the other life that they might have had if you were not there for them – which is usually not good.

To caseworkers – Build a strong bond with the youth that you work with.

To judges – I have learned over the years that things happen for a reason, and I should be grateful for what I have.

I know that I am lucky to have the life that I am living now, but I love my birth family very much and seeing them comforts me.

It is good for the youth and birth families to still be able to see each other, because it will settle many questions that linger.

It is important for youth to keep their relationships, especially with their families.

Sandra

Hello. My name is Sandra.

- I am 18 years old.
- I just graduated from Wells High School in June.
- The things that I am most proud of are that I graduated with a 4.1 GPA and that I have been taking care of myself for a long time.
- My strengths are being a leader and listening well to others.
- I will attend Northwestern Business College in the fall.
- My long term goal is to be a police officer or a lawyer.

My story:

- I entered foster care at the age of 3.
- I was in foster care for 6 years.
- When I was 9 years old I was adopted by my grandmother. I would like to tell you some things about that adoption:
 - Tell the story of going before the judge with your brother.
 - Your grandmother was not in the room but she had told you to say that everything was all right at home and that you wanted to be adopted.
 - If you did not say that, the court would give you to a stranger who could do anything to you.
 - Tell how the judge made you feel – how tall the bench was, how big and mean he looked – even though the things that he was saying were not mean. How he could have made it more comfortable for you and your brother, and allowed you to tell him the truth. How you did not know what adoption was, that you did not like being with your grandmother, but you were very scared of what would happen if you told him the truth. The judge should have come down and held your hand. He should have sat with you in a comfortable place and allowed you to talk. So should the caseworker, and the lawyer.
- After the adoption, I continued to see my mother sometimes and all of the other people in my family. My father never came though. Every single birthday I would wish on my cake that my father would come and I would watch out the window for him. When I turned 13 I decided that I was not going to wait for him anymore. Now he has come back. I did not want to be at this place – but I can't say that I want to see my dad any more or that I love him. I just can't accept him.
- I do see my mom. Every blue moon she can sit and watch TV or a movie, and we just sit together and relax. Even if we don't talk, I can feel what she is thinking. And when we do that it does mean a lot to me. But more often she comes around when she is intoxicated. She acts like a whole other person. It makes me feel like I don't have a mother at all. She says some things while she is intoxicated that hurt. The next day she says that she doesn't mean it – but the words linger in my mind. So I would rather just not be around her.
- I look like my father and I have my mother's name – that is a double negative.
- The relationships that have really mattered to me have been with my brothers and sisters. If the rest of it had fallen by the wayside, it would have been ok. At least, that is the way I feel now.

- My siblings have been there for me from Day 1 – even though only my brother and me were adopted by our grandmother. I have always been able to talk to them about anything, and they support me in everything that I do. I see them every day.
- The thing helps me get through it all that makes me really happy is that I do have some family that care about me. That family is my sisters and brothers and my boyfriend.

My advice:

To young people - Don't let anything stand in your way to making it to the top. If something bad is going on in your house or if you don't want to be adopted – speak up. Do not let your voice be unheard.

To foster parents - Do not adopt the children unless you really love them and want to take care of them.

To adoptive parents or guardians - Make sure that you know what you are getting into and that you know how to handle it.

To caseworkers - Make sure not to promise anything that you will not follow through with. Do not violate the child's confidence. It can make things even worse for the child.

To lawyers and judges - Do more to make the child feel more comfortable around you. Allow the child to find a comfort level with you so that they are able to talk to you without being afraid. Let the child talk with you alone in a private place if she seems at all nervous or upset.

Basilia Presentation Summary

A. My name is Basilia Celli.

- I am 16 years old
- I entered foster care when I was born and stayed in care for 14 years.
- I had three placements.
- I plan to study medicine.
- My goals are to become a pediatrician and to have a good family.

B. Separation from family

- When I was in 6th grade my younger brother and I were taken out of school and we were placed with our aunt. From that day on as long as we were with my aunt we were not allowed to see our parents or our grandparents who had lived with us and taken care of us from the day I was born. That went on for a year and a half.

C. Meeting Bobbi Jo

- Then we met Bobbie Jo, who is now our mother. From the first day she told us that she thought that it was very important that we keep a connection with our parents and grandparents.
- When she said that, it made me feel very good about her and much better about thinking about being adopted.
- Deciding to be adopted would have been much harder if I thought that it meant that I would not be able to see my parents.
- Now I see my whole birth family on holidays and special occasions – my mother and father, my older brother who aged out of foster care, and my younger brother who was born later, and also my grandparents.

D. Birth relatives that I see now

- I have contact with family members on my birth mother's side of the family and my birth father's side of the family; I have one brother who lives with me; and I see aunts, uncles, and cousins.
- My cousins are especially important to me because they are my age and they are easy for me to talk to and fun to be with. I especially like to see them on holidays and on breaks from school.
- I see a lot of people in my birth family on lots of occasions, like:
Holidays
Birthdays
Graduations
Other family events (i.e. funeral)

E. It is important to me to see my birth family because:

- It makes me feel happy
 - I am reassured on how they are doing
 - With my cousins I feel safe and I can talk about anything
 - I can ask for information like, when did I walk, what were my first words, etc.
 - I can ask for medical information like when did I have the chicken pox
- And especially:

- It makes me feel safe to see my birth parents – to know that they are there and that they are ok.

F. Some people think that it must be very upsetting to see my family.

- Well, you can't forget about your family. You might get emotional when you see them, but it will just make it worse if you don't.
- Some people think it's just not right to see your birth family because of things that happened in the past. But even if people make mistakes they deserve another chance.
- Being able to see my birth parents has made my life easier.
- And it is not just about them, it is about my brothers too. My brothers and I should not have to give up seeing each other. Seeing my brothers makes me feel great.

Closing:

I think it would be great for all children to be able to see their birth families when they are in foster care or adopted.

Chasity

Hello my name is Chasity. I am 13 years old. I entered into foster care when I was three months old. I have been in the same placement every since then. My foster mom adopted me when I was 9 years old. I am in 7th grade going into 8th.

When I get older my goals are that I want to be a lawyer and a singer. My greatest achievements are that I bought up my grades and I received a 105% on my science test.

The connections that were and still are important are with my brothers, sister, mom, and other family members. I am thankful that my adoptive mom is open to me being in their life even after adoption. Could you imagine knowing someone for nine years of your life and then being told you can't see them no more? Well I did and it was scary for me.

I love having my birth brothers and sister around, they are very supportive of me and work with me all the time. They come down on me when I need to bring my grades up and read more and help me make the right choices. They help me with being patient with my adoptive mom and to appreciate her for taking care of me. They also help me understand that my birth mom has a mental illness and to love her no matter what. And I do!

I am really glad that my adoptive mom lets me go over on holidays and weekends and summers to visit my family. I was really excited to go see my older sister graduate at her college with the rest of my family. I used to enjoy going to visit her down at her campus in Champaign. I used to also love to travel with her when she used to be on the youth advisory boards and help other kids that grew up just like us. I learned a lot from her and I am still learning. When I get older I want to go to college just like her and my brothers.

Being in my sister's life is important to me, she gets to give me all types of advice, plus I get to wear her clothes. Although she thinks she is hard on me, I want her to know I'm ok with it -- someone has to be.

I love seeing people that look just like me. I love it when my brother and sister send my other brother a ticket every summer to come to Chicago from Puerto Rico, so we can spend the whole summer together.

My advice to you before I go:

- It is always important to feel like you belong to a family
- To let family see each other during holidays and birthdays
- To let me see my family even after adoption
- To invite me to court so I can tell you what I want and so I can know what's really going on
- Finally, it's important for you to see me, hear me, and listen to me even if you think I'm too young, because then you can educate others about what's important for kids like me!

I have a question for you to consider, why is it that it took for me to get out of care for me to be able to see my siblings more?

Thank you very much for listening to US!

Appendix F Build on Your Accomplishment

Continuing the Process

**Proposed Time Line for Follow through on the Family Connections Project
in the Child Protection Division, Cook County Circuit Court**

**Ongoing Connections Implementation Responses Cook County Juvenile
Court Attorney Offices**

Continuing the Process

After the presentation, the Legal Subcommittee was to reconvene to consider all of the office recommendations. Any that were in conflict would be resolved between the office heads in order to assure that efforts on behalf of youth connections with family would move forward with a minimum of conflict among professionals.

Because we could only accommodate an audience of eighty at the Ongoing Connections presentation for attorney offices, many attorneys in this large court were not able to attend. In order to carry the message to all, plans were laid to show the video at the next staff meeting at each of the attorney offices and to introduce the implementation recommendations made by the office attorneys who had attended Ongoing Connections. When possible a youth who had participated on the panel would join in the presentation.

Prior to the presentation, the Legal Subcommittee who had worked on the Cook County project made the suggestions below with the goal of developing a group of leaders who would facilitate follow through.

1. Have designated attorney representatives from each office (Public Defender, Public Guardian, Office of the State's Attorney, and DCFS Office of Legal Services) meet the kids at one of the practice sessions.
2. The attorneys who have met the kids facilitate their office break-out group at the Ongoing Connections presentation to generate suggestions on how their office can support continued connections for kids and their birth families.
3. The same attorneys present the group implementation recommendations to their entire office at a staff meeting using the video of the youth panel and perhaps assisted by one of the youth. The same attorneys informally monitor the implementation of the office recommendations.
4. The designated attorneys report back to the office on the implementation of the practice recommendations and lead the discussion on whether and how to amend them as – generating a final list of recommendations for standard office use.

Unfortunately, we were not able to accomplish step number one –getting the kids and lawyers together. Sometimes the things that seem the easiest can be the most difficult. Youth have school during the week, and attorneys don't work on the weekend, so scheduling killed a good idea. But the Legal Subcommittee's idea of vesting a sense of leadership in a handful of individuals is a good one, and we are working to keep it alive.

In Cook County, we drafted the plan for follow through at the last meeting of the Legal Subcommittee prior to Ongoing Connections, an expansion on the 4-step leadership plan above. It outlines follow through from the April 2006 Legal Subcommittee meeting through the fall of the following year.

The plan is intense and ambitious and will not be fulfilled to the letter. The two dates planned for presentation have been merged to one and other changes are sure to be made. It does, however, serve as a guide and a reminder of some of the many ways that the court advocates can work together for the well being of children and their families.

Proposed Time Line for Follow Through on the Family Connections Project in the Child Protection Division, Cook County Circuit Court

Requires three additional meetings of the Legal Subgroup – August 2006, February 2006, and fall 2007.

April 2006 -----Fall 2007

May -

- identify youth
- meeting # 1 with all youth
- name office facilitators, determine whether there will be judicial facilitators and name

June –

- youth meeting #2, **judicial facilitators** meet with youth for lunch – they are paired with the youth who will be in their break-out group.

July –

- **July 12 – presentation to judicial officers**
- youth meeting #3, **office facilitators** for the August training meet with youth for lunch – they are paired with the youth who will be in their break-out group.

August –

- **August 9 – presentation to attorney offices**
- Possible post-training lunch with youth and facilitators (and Legal Subgroup?) members to de-brief, talk about implementation steps, and propose a method of tracking the implementation of the recommendations by each office
- **Legal Subcommittee meets** to review office recommendations and tracking proposals, identifying any conflicts or enhancements in ways the offices can work together.

August – October

- **Facilitators present training group recommendations and implementation plan to their offices**, supported by the youth video if one has been made or youth co-presenter when possible..
- Facilitators tell offices that this topic will be re-visited in three or four months to determine effectiveness of the recommendations so that they can be passed on to the national network affiliated with the project and to the court. Support is solicited for this trial period.
- Legal coordinator for the Family Connections project is present for this discussion to hear concerns, answer questions regarding the intention/scope of the project.

November – January

- Tracking reports summarized by legal offices. Facilitators report back to their offices on implementation of practice recommendations and lead discussion regarding success/shortcomings of the practices. Recommendations for change are accepted.
- Legal coordinator for the Family Connections project is present for this discussion as previous.

February 2007

- Legal coordinator for Family Connections project compiles recommendations from all offices into a coherent document as a draft set of best practices for legal counsel in child protection cases to preserve important relationships for youth as they move from the guardianship of the state to permanency. Recommendations are clearly identified as originating from the individual legal offices and reflecting the appropriate role of each office.
- Draft compilation of practice recommendations sent to members of Legal Subcommittee for individual review.
- **Legal Subgroup meets for joint review of the recommendations.** Document amended as necessary, incorporating comments from each of the offices as desired.

March 2007

- **Best practice recommendations:**
 - Incorporated into the Family Connections project report to the Children's Bureau and to coordinating projects across the country
 - Offered to the Presiding Judge as a report of the work of this project in the Cook County Child Protection Division
 - Sent as a final product to all participants in the July and August 2006 presentations as the outcome of their work.

Fall 2007

- **Legal Subgroup meets**, including the office facilitators –
 - Report to them on the progress of the practice provisions of the project on the child welfare side and as known on the court side
 - Report from them on continued efficacy of practice recommendations.

To date we have achieved a consolidated list of implementation suggestions of the attorney offices toward the support of ongoing connections for youth in foster care.

Ongoing Connections Implementation Responses Cook County Juvenile Court Attorney Offices

The following questions were presented to representatives of attorney offices at the Ongoing Connections presentation on July 12, 2006. Their responses follow:

1. How does preservation of ongoing connections for foster youth moving to permanency relate to your office mission?
2. What are the challenges to maintaining relationships of young adults in foster care to relatives and significant others?
3. What can your office do to make ongoing connections more possible for youth moving to permanency?
4. What can you as an individual attorney in your office do to make ongoing connections more possible for youth moving to permanency?

Office of the Public Defender (OPD)

Office of Legal Services, DCFS (OLS)

Office of the Public Guardian (OPG)

Relationship of Ongoing Connections to Office Mission

OPD

Preservation of ongoing family connections is a primary goal of the Office of the Public Defender. This does not just involve keeping parents connected with their children—it involves siblings, grandparents, godparents, caregivers –anyone who has been a part of the lives of our clients' children.

DCFS

At the Department we are charged with the responsibility of maintaining sibling and family relations. This is our mandate.

OPG

The Office of the Public Guardian represents our clients' interests and, for many clients, ongoing contact is in their interest.

Recommendations for the Office Support of Ongoing Connections

OPD

- Support legislation and policy in this area, including open adoption
- Develop relationships in an effort to make ongoing connection a reality for children and families
- Continue in all of the things that we do to preserve families

DCFS

- Regular diligent search
- Sib/family meetings regularly scheduled

OPG

- Work on identifying relatives from the beginning, especially relatives to foster sibling visits.
- Obtain information from parents/family/client about relationships.
- Ensure that when a child is being placed we talk to the foster parents about the need for visits.
- Educate foster parents about the need for visits – including post-permanency visits. Encourage foster parents to facilitate visits to build relationships.
- Make agencies accountable for not fostering visits.
- Educate pre-adoptive parents on the importance of maintaining family connections.
- Make sure that the court keeps this issue as a primary issue.
- Use court ordered mediation between family and prospective adoptive parents/guardians.
- Advocate for system creation of post - permanency visitation centers and inclusion of funding for post-permanency visits in adoption subsidies.

Recommendations for Individual Attorney Support

OPD

- Continue to raise this critical issue at every stage of the child protection case.
- Use legal tools available to highlight the importance of and need for family connections.
- Make use of mediation services.
- Make necessary record for appeal.

DCFS

- Talk regularly with the caseworkers when they are in court about what they are doing to maintain family connections.

OPG

- Involve the court and make sure that the issue stays on the front burner.
- Get court orders for visits/written plans. Ask for this at TC.
- At court family conference ask for diligent search for all family, not just for placement.
- Agency review of relationships – better documentation and talk to clients and family.
- Consistent and periodic effort to search for family.
- Maintain the history of the family in the file.
- Talk to clients about what they want. Remember to advocate for clients of all ages.
- Dialogue with the foster parents and caseworkers about this issue.
- Work with parents attorneys to receive and share information on important relationships.
- Encourage consents to bring information for the registry to clients.
- Advocate in court and with the agency for items in #3.

Identified Challenges to the Successful Support of Ongoing Connections

OPD

- Current legislation
- Court system
- Unwillingness of professionals in the system to change their thinking
- Foster Parents not willing to make ongoing connections a reality
- Agencies not willing to make ongoing connections a reality

DCFS

- Manpower --- Often child welfare specialists' heavy case loads and schedules impede their ability to offer & facilitate relative visits.
- Work hours – There are departmental and purchase of services agency staff that facilitate family visits, as well as agencies that specialize in facilitating visits. However, an increase in these types of facilities and expanded operating schedules could lead to an increase the number of family visits taking place.

OPG

- Lack of knowledge of all parties of how important this issue is
- Getting visits going consistently
- Whereabouts of relatives – where are they, how we find them
- Adoptive parents not interested
- Relationships are not nurtured between face-to-face visits
- No system structure to encourage visits
- Willingness of foster parents to participate in visits
- Willingness of agency to foster visits
- Availability of foster homes for multiple siblings
- Transportation

An additional note:

Foster Youth Speak out Online

The Jim Casey Youth Initiative supports FYI, an interactive website for foster youth,

One of its features is Talk Back. Each week a new question is posted and foster youth age 14 and older respond. The results are not statistically significant and may not represent all foster youth. The comments do, however, provide an unedited look into the minds of older youth in foster care.

103 youth responded to the question below. Many made comments, all of which are reproduced on the pages that follow. After these comments you will find a list of the other questions and answers posted on the Talk Back page.

Have you ever "snuck" a visit or phone call to your bio family members, even though you weren't supposed to? Would you if you could?

all answers are confidential

63% say "I have!"

22% say "I would if I could figure out how!"

15% say "I have not and would not!"

You can find FYI, the website for foster youth, including Talk Back, at
www.fyi3.com.

It is worth a look!