



A Historic Opportunity to Reform the Child Welfare System: Youth & Alumni Priorities on Preventing Unnecessary Removal of Children from their Families

Adopted: October 2019

Introduction

Meaningful youth and alumni engagement in child welfare efforts lead to better outcomes for children and youth served by the system. In addition to playing an integral role in the development and passage of the Family First Prevention Services Act (P.L. 115-123; hereafter: "Family First"), young leaders from National Foster Care Youth & Alumni Policy Council have been involved in their communities, tribes, states, and at a national level in elevating priorities to improve child welfare policy and practice. Further, the Council wishes to elevate policy priorities developed by the Council for consideration as child welfare leaders and stakeholders craft a vision for and build a 21st Century Child Welfare System.

Throughout this statement, we have outlined opportunities for engagement for individuals looking to implement or further these recommendations. This engagement may include opportunities for stakeholders, service providers and agency administration. We want to emphasize the critical role of young people with lived experience in moving towards a 21st Century Child Welfare System. States, tribes, jurisdictions and agencies must be engaging young people (and other constituents) across continuum from the individual/family case level to systems level change in foster care and child welfare services. (refer to Children's Bureau [ACYF-CB-IM-19-03](#)).

Priority 1: Substance misuse and mental health crises are tearing our families apart — treat them with the urgency and resources that they require.

Substance use and mental health status should not automatically warrant child removal to out-of-home placement. If a caregiver(s) has a substance misuse or mental health issue, child welfare professionals should identify treatment options that allow them to stay in their home or go into treatment as a family, whenever possible (i.e., whenever safe and sustainable). Child welfare agencies should be required to have substance misuse and mental health specialists on site, or have established agreements with existing community public health systems that can assess individual cases at the time of investigation, connect families to services, and make recommendations to keep families together during treatment.

— Originally proposed in [*Preventing Unnecessary Removal of Children from their Families*](#), adopted by the Council on October 1, 2017

Current Considerations:

- Family First provides special considerations for expecting and parenting youth who are in foster care.¹ Substance misuse and mental health interventions must be provided to expecting and parenting young people who are or were in foster care, including fathers.
- In envisioning a 21st Century Child Welfare System, we must understand that substance misuse may impact children in families differently according to their age, history, and developmental status/abilities. For instance, many youth have grown up in families with parents who did not always meet their needs due to substance use or mental health concerns, and have therefore developed skills and strategies for meeting their own needs (i.e., have developed relative independence). Similarly, safety considerations are different for children and youth with different ages and developmental abilities (e.g., a 16 year old compared to a toddler, or a typically vs. non-typically developing child) living in a household with a parent struggling with opioid addiction.

“I feel that CPS limited my parents' ability to succeed. My dad had to appear at the court weekly and had to have weekly drug testing. However, there was no transportation available. The area was too big to walk to and from appointments.”

- 20 year old male, placed in Arizona's foster care system due to parental alcohol, drug, mental health, and physical abuse.

Opportunities for Engagement:

- Ensure prevention services in your state or jurisdiction employ cross-system collaboration when delivering prevention services (e.g., child welfare services, primary care providers, teachers, mental health care services, housing, transportation services, community support programs, etc.).
- Advocate for holistic, strengths-based addiction treatment services that keep families together during parents' course of treatment.
- If your personal experience involves entering foster care due to parental substance abuse or mental health issues, tell your story at FamilyVoicesUnited.org.

¹“Expecting and parenting youth” refers to all youth who are parenting or expecting to parent a child, irrespective of their gender identity or sex, including youth who are pregnant or whose partners are pregnant.

Priority 2: Connect our families to services, even after we have been reunified with our family.

In instances when a child returns home from foster care (i.e. reunifies), it is critical to ensure the family's continued access to holistic supports and services. Doing so could prevent that child from being re-traumatized by helping to ensure that reunification is successful and avoiding re-entry into foster care. Families should have access to regular, planned in-home visits by health, social service, and child development professionals. This would help families learn how to promote their child's safety and well-being and be the safest, healthiest family they can be.

— Originally proposed in [*Preventing Unnecessary Removal of Children from their Families*](#), adopted by the Council on October 1, 2017

Current Considerations:

- Family First allows the use of Title IV-B funds for fifteen months of family reunification services beginning the date the child(ren) exit foster care. States must systematically assess each family's needs and connect them with services that will prevent the child's reentry into care, prevent future maltreatment, and promote safe, sustainable placements and relationships. Child welfare workers should engage youth and families in determining which reunification services might be most beneficial to them and what accommodations might be necessary to ensure their successful receipt of services (e.g., request a location close to a public transportation stop, request appointment times that do not threaten their employment by requiring them to miss work, inform service providers of strategies that have or have not worked for them in the past, etc.).
- We must consider what factors contribute to failed reunification attempts that we may have overlooked to date. Although access to services is critical for family reunification, a 21st Century Child Welfare System should expand its scope to address more systemic issues that may affect child removal and displacement (e.g., access to affordable and high-quality early care and education, access to mental and physical health care, access to affordable housing in safe communities, etc.).
- In alignment with the vision for the 21st Century Child Welfare System, we must re-frame our view of reunification - that is, stop considering reunification to be the end of a family's need for services, and instead, a "new beginning" for families who still have a journey ahead of them.

"We weren't prepared to come home. My mom had been working on herself and was ready to be a mom, but I wasn't ready for that...That transition could have been easier if I had been prepared for that."

— Kodi, foster alumni from Iowa

Opportunities for Engagement:

- Advocate for increased research into the effectiveness of different family reunification service interventions.
- Advocate for increased data collection to determine what percentage of reunified youth receive family reunification services.
- If your personal experience involves family reunification services, consider telling your story at FamilyVoicesUnited.org.

Priority 3: Don't use our removal as a way to punish our parent(s).

Child welfare professionals should be primarily committed to helping children to stay safe and healthy; placement in foster care must never be used as punishment. Unless a child's health or safety is at immediate risk, children should not be removed from their home. If a child's family member relapses or misses an appointment, a child welfare professional should determine what services can be provided to support their families in an effort to keep them together. Removal of a child, and threats to remove, should not be used as punishment for parents' behavior or perceived lack of compliance, but rather should only occur when a child is immediately unsafe in their current environment.

— Originally proposed in [*Preventing Unnecessary Removal of Children from their Families*](#), adopted by the Council on October 1, 2017

Current Considerations:

- Utilize Family First's authorized prevention and early intervention funds to provide prevention services without removal, whenever possible.
- We need to revisit and revise our traditional tolerance for risk; all children are at risk - the important consideration is whether or not those children are "safe".
- Similarly, child welfare professionals must recognize that removing a child from his or her family/parents does not eliminate the risks for that child, and in fact introduces additional risks associated with foster placement, parent-child separation, attachment disruption, residential mobility, school changes, and removal from their communities.
- In the way that we examine and document families' risk factors, a 21st Century Child Welfare System needs to formally and thoughtfully examine and document families' protective factors (e.g., using the CSSP [5 Protective Factors Framework](#)).
- A 21st Century Child Welfare System will better integrate the science of attachment into our decisions and processes around removing children and youth from natal/biological caregivers.

"We may not have had the luxuries that other families had, but that does not mean that I was not taken care of. My family was made of a single parent mother on disability; despite

this my basic, emotional, and educational needs were being met. I had what I needed and was still deemed an ‘imminent risk’.”

— Eric, foster alumni from Arizona

Opportunities for Engagement:

- Ensure that child welfare caseworker training includes content addressing cultural competence, implicit biases, and values, as well as how they factor into decisions to remove a child from his/her natal family. Promote training and practices that refrain from using language that paints child removal as a punishment or threat to be imposed on parents. Engage youth, parents, and kinship caregivers in training development and delivery.
- If your story involved hasty or unnecessary removal of children and youth from parents, consider sharing your story at FamilyVoicesUnited.org, using a [strategic sharing](#) method.

Priority 4: Explore the multitude of reasons why youth are “aging out” of adoptions and look at how it can be prevented.

Through a growing number of stories we hear from our peers, we believe there is a problem with older youth being “let go” from their adoptive families once they turn 18 and adoption subsidies end. We would like federal help in tracking how often this is really happening and why. Are youth coming back into foster care after a disrupted adoption occurs? What supports and resources are available to youth when this occurs? What post-adoption services should be available to families to assist them prior to a disruption? Permanence isn’t something that child welfare achieves and then walks away from. We believe that young people adopted from foster care, along with their families, deserve access to continued support and education to help them adjust.

— Originally proposed in [Five Ideas](#), adopted by the Council on August 2012

Current Considerations:

- Family First allows states to utilize Title IV-E dollars to provide evidence-based prevention services to youth at imminent risk of entering foster care, including adopted youth at imminent risk of entering foster care - and their parents (biological, adopted) or kinship caregivers. States must develop their capacities and tools to assess the risk of adopted youth re-entering foster care and connect those who are to prevention services. This may include expanding the scope of eligibility for families who qualify for Title IV-E prevention services in their home states.
- A 21st Century Child Welfare System should proactively address the challenges that may result in adoption disruption or dissolution. States must consider what factors contribute to adoption disruption or dissolution and how states can mitigate them through population-level efforts upon, or even prior to, adoption.

"If I had received services as a young adult who had been adopted, I believe it would have allowed me to have a smoother transition into adulthood. Post-adoptive services are key to ensuring that young adults who have experienced failed adoptions have equal opportunity to receive services that would address their educational, financial, housing, and personal needs."

— Latasha, foster alumni from North Carolina

Opportunities for Engagement:

- Advocate for formal requirements for caseworkers to locate relatives and family members as potential placements before making youth in foster care available for adoption, in order to place children and youth in long-standing relationships with invested caregivers whenever possible. These efforts should include asking youth themselves to identify relatives with whom they would like to have contact or explore possibilities for placement.
- Many adopted young adults will choose to return to their biological family upon turning eighteen. Consider how we can support their relational permanency with those individuals, including their siblings, while also supporting their adoption. Identify opportunities for educating all stakeholders on family relationship preservation. These efforts may include exploring the use of technology to support relative contact (e.g., video-chatting).
- Support research into what factors contribute to adoption disruption and dissolution, including survey studies of adoptive parents and adopted youth. Consider how items and questions should be worded to avoid desirability response biases.
- Support the development of a family resource organization to provide post-adoptive supports to adoptive parents and youth, and prevent disruptions.
- If your personal experience involves adoption disruption or dissolution and would have benefited from prevention services, consider telling your story at FamilyVoicesUnited.org.

Priority 5: Engage with us during the investigation and when developing prevention services for my family.

Young people hold valuable information. When developmentally appropriate, child welfare professionals should tap into this knowledge in their efforts to develop service plans and to provide services to families in crisis. According to our survey, only 41% of youth reported having been included in the investigation process that led to their placement in foster care. While most young people surveyed were able to identify the challenges within their family, they did not hold knowledge about specific services their family could have benefitted from. That's where child welfare professionals come in - to help identify and provide resources. Further, child welfare

professionals should consult with young people using them as a resource for identifying supportive adults during what could be a traumatic experience for children and their families.
— Originally proposed in [*Preventing Unnecessary Removal of Children from their Families*](#), adopted by the Council on October 1, 2017

Current Considerations:

- Family First provides federal funding for state and county child welfare authorities to provide multi-faceted supports and services to children, youth, and families before and/or without removal to out-of-home care - these services should be selected by the entire team, including the children, youth, and families themselves.
- A 21st Century Child Welfare System should redesign current guidelines and regulations related to asking children, youth, and families about their situation, their needs, their desired services, their protective factors, and possible relative/fictive kin placements when out-of-home care is necessary.

“I would have liked to have known sooner what was going on and why it was happening.

I was just thrown in with no knowledge of why.”

— 16 year old survey respondent in Arizona’s foster care system

“I had a large extended family when I was taken into care, so I was frustrated when I was placed and stuck in congregate care settings and non-relative foster homes for years.

When I built connections with those family members as an adult, they would say things like ‘I wish I would have known - I would have taken you in’, and it broke my heart to think about all of the heartache and trauma that could have been avoided if my caseworkers would have asked me about my extended family instead of assuming I didn’t have any.”

— Brittany, alumni of care from Indiana

Opportunities for Engagement:

- Advocate for the creation of formal guidelines for engaging in age-appropriate dialogues with children and youth to explain what is happening, why it is happening, and what might happen next.
- Advocate for a formal capacity for giving youth and parent voices a space in formal discussions, court documents and reports, etc.
- Advocate for a formal mechanism for youth to provide caseworkers with contact information for relatives who may serve as placements.

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About the Council

The National Foster Care Youth & Alumni Policy Council convenes to provide federal stakeholders with relevant and timely information as policies and procedures are created that will affect children and families throughout the country. The Council represents a collective viewpoint of youth and alumni who have experienced the child welfare system first-hand.

The Council consists of members geographically distributed across the country, reflecting a broad range of diversity encompassing, but not limited to, ethnicity, location of residency, religion and gender, and child welfare experiences. The feedback contained in this document is based on a compilation and review of the Council's priorities over the past six years. The original Council priorities are linked in the document, and have been developed by Council members through a process that includes polling of hundreds of peers currently and formerly in the foster care system, reflection on their own lived experiences, and consultation with the constituent organizations they are supported by (such as Youth Boards, FosterClub, and Foster Care Alumni of America Chapters).

The Council is a partnership between Foster Care Alumni of America and FosterClub, with generous support from Casey Family Programs. For more information, or to view other Council priorities, visit NationalPolicyCouncil.org.