Older children and youth in recent years have come to comprise an increasingly larger proportion of the foster care population in the United States. Their needs differ in significant ways from those of younger children for whom permanency has long been a primary goal. Traditionally, child welfare systems have focused on preparing older children and youth for adulthood—with far less attention directed to efforts to reunify them with their birth families, find new families for them through adoption or guardianship, or help them forge lifelong connections with caring, committed adults who will “be there” for them as they transition to the adult world and beyond. Although permanency planning is certainly not new to those familiar with foster care, efforts to achieve enduring connections to families for older children and youth too often have been sacrificed in the service of concentrating on preparation for independent living.

In this volume, we explore the challenges that child welfare systems confront in meeting the permanency needs of older children and youth in foster care. We examine the potentially conflicting goals that can lead to the development of policies and practices that fail to support efforts to achieve and sustain enduring family relationships, and we propose practice and
policy approaches that can guide effective permanency work with these children and youth. We recognize that although states are charged with acting in loco parentis when children and youth enter foster care, bureaucracies cannot provide them with the nurturing, guidance, cheerleading, safety net in times of trouble, and ongoing supports into adulthood that “good” parents provide.

The volume is based on a belief that child welfare systems will better serve children and youth by redefining their role, changing it from substitute parenting to ensuring that children and youth are connected to safe, nurturing, and forever families. With a commitment to achieving and sustaining family permanence for these youth, child welfare agencies can ensure that when they leave care and their cases are closed, they will have the benefit of caring, supportive families that young people require as they move into adulthood and beyond.

PERMANENCE AND LIFELONG FAMILY CONNECTIONS

From both a practice and a legal perspective, family-based permanence is the preferred outcome for children and youth in foster care. Families provide them not only with shelter and financial supports but also with a set of relationships with consistent and supportive adults that are intended to last indefinitely—individuals to whom a child can return for support even as an adult. For these young persons, permanence means lifelong family connections and can take a variety of forms: reunification with parents; permanent placement with relatives; guardianship with relatives or other committed adults; adoption; or, when legal permanence is not possible, life-long connections with caring adults who, though not in a legal relationship, are committed to the child into adulthood. The objective of achieving permanence is to reach the optimal balance of physical, emotional/relational, legal, and cultural dimension within every child’s and youth’s array of family relationships.

As defined by Casey Family Services, the direct services agency of the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2005), permanence means having an enduring family relationship that

- is safe and meant to last a lifetime
- offers the legal right and social status of full family membership
- provides for physical, emotional, social, cognitive, and spiritual well-being
• assures lifelong connections to extended family, siblings, and other significant adults, along with family history and traditions, race, ethnicity, culture, religion, and language.

Despite the diversity of shapes that families take across cultures, the protective and nurturing social bonds are omnipresent (Erera, 2002). Families locate children in the social order and play a major role in the enculturation and socialization of children and youth. Contemporary society generally views “family” as a haven from the world, encouraging “intimacy, love and trust where individuals may escape the competition of dehumanising forces in modern society” (Zinn and Eitzen, 1987:18). The family provides love and protection from the outside world and is seen ideally as a place where parents provide warmth, tenderness, understanding, and protection. Some have argued, however, that personal or family fulfillment—that is, the role of the family in supplying what is “vitaly needed but missing from other social arrangements”—has replaced protection as the major role of the family (Zinn and Eitzen, 1987:29).

The first teacher of life skills has always been the family. While the notions of childhood and adolescence have changed over time, there is remarkable cross-cultural consistency regarding the progressive assumption of adult roles within the context of protective family and supportive community, punctuated by a variety of rituals that recognize the emerging independent adult, connected to family and community in a different, more autonomous, and more responsible manner. Within families, children and youth have opportunities to practice the skills that they will need when they take their place as adults in their communities.

Western literature reflects the centrality of—and dependence on—the family for helping youth through the difficult adjustment to adulthood. Case histories ranging from Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, to Dickens’s orphaned Oliver Twist and Pip of Great Expectations, to Star Wars’ Luke and Leia Skywalker, highlight the potential destructive influence of missing or dysfunctional family on adolescents, as well as the power of a loving family to rescue and rehabilitate. These universal themes are particularly salient to young people in foster care, given their earlier experiences within troubled families of origin; their often mixed experiences within foster families who may or may not provide them with meaningful relationships; and uncertainties about the future as they set about navigating the adult world without the clear support and assistance of parents or extended family.
OLDER YOUTH AND PREPARATION FOR ADULTHOOD

Older youth in foster care may be launched into adulthood directly from their placements with foster families, in group homes, or in institutional settings. Like all youth, they need a variety of preparatory training and experiential learning opportunities in order to transition successfully to adulthood (Georgiades, 2005). For youth in foster care, these training experiences and learning opportunities are particularly vital. They leave the relatively protected shelter of life in foster care to live on their own, and they generally have not had the benefit of progressive preparation for adulthood that families normatively provide to their children over the course of preadolescence and adolescence. Child welfare systems have long recognized the urgent need to provide youth with a range of social and life skills that can assist them in navigating the adult world.

Although there has been a mobilization of a variety of resources to train youth in concrete independent living skills, primarily in classroom environments, less attention has been given to the critical role of relationships in preparing them for adulthood and sustaining them as they transition to adult roles and beyond. Criticism of independent living programs has focused on the absence of efforts to connect youth with family members or other caring, committed adults who can offer them the benefits of a family relationship that will sustain them as they transition to adulthood and beyond. For some years, permanency specialist Lauren Frey has asked her workshop audiences to write down “the things that your family did for you, gave to you, taught you or passed on to you that helped you to become a successful, productive adult” (Frey, 2005:6). She then asks participants to select the top three “must-haves if you have to choose.” She notes that people consistently prioritize qualities such as unconditional love, a sense of belonging, family traditions, a strong work ethic, a chance to make mistakes, the value of spirituality, a home, emotional support, and belief in one’s self. In contrast, items on a sample standardized pre-discharge checklist from child welfare agencies seem to miss the mark: youth will have an alarm clock, a high school diploma or GED, a source of income, a hobby, a library card, and a driver’s license.

Ensuring that youth in foster care are connected with families through legal relationships or family-like relationships with caring, committed adults presents a complicated challenge to researchers, policymakers, and social service practitioners. This volume represents an effort to assemble research from disparate fields to shed light on the integration of the two
primary and potentially complementary goals of the child welfare system: connecting youth with families for life and providing youth with the skills and assets they will need to survive and prosper in their adulthood.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

The authors contributing to this volume answered an invitation from the editors to consider what their research meant for efforts to promote permanence for older children and youth in foster care. As participants in a Research Roundtable in September 2006, the authors brought differing perspectives, engaged in a rich exchange with other researchers and practitioners, and contributed to the evidence base. The Roundtable was held in conjunction with the 2006 National Convening on Youth Permanence, sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation/Casey Family Services. Specifically, they addressed the following questions:

- What is the current state of child welfare practice and research in the United States?
- Which questions have been addressed?
- Which new questions need to be addressed?
- What are the child and family characteristics that predict enduring outcomes in family relationships and effective life skills?
- What are the implications for recruitment and retention of foster families?
- What are the implications for work with special populations, such as:
  - Eliminating disproportionality in service provision and outcomes?
  - Addressing the special needs of children of color; newer immigrant families; gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth; and other historically underserved groups?
- What are the policies and practices that have been found to promote success in building enduring family relationships for youth in foster care?
  - With whom? Under what conditions? How?
  - How do these efforts relate to previous policy or practice reform (e.g., concurrent planning)?
- What are the implications for shaping future practices and policies that will promote permanency for youth in foster care?
  - What is needed to implement and achieve this outcome?
  - What must organizations provide to support this work?
  - What preventive and early intervention efforts are needed?
The participants discussed critical issues; explored emerging policy and practice responses; and offered recommendations to policymakers, service providers, and researchers to increase the likelihood that each youth in foster care will exit the system with an enduring family relationship that he or she can count on for life. Their presentations were organized into three panels, which parallel this volume: describing the problem, policy responses, and practice responses.

Describing the Problem

To craft an effective and efficient response, the problem has to be well understood. In the first section of this volume, the focus is on describing the challenges associated with meeting the permanency needs of youth in foster care. How many youth leave foster care without families? What are the characteristics of these youth and their experiences before leaving care? What are the outcomes for youth who leave foster care through “aging out”? To what extent do these youth have family relationships on which they can depend? When youth leave foster care to families, how “permanent” are these arrangements? To what extent do placement-related factors influence the permanence of these family relationships? Do the research findings make the case for urgency with regard to new policy and practice responses?

In the chapters in this section, researchers—both those who presented at the Roundtable and the respondents to those presentations—explore what is known from national data about youth who age out of foster care and those who leave care to family. They also examine the dynamics associated with “impermanence” when youth leave foster care.

Policy Responses

Federal, state, and local policies play a key role in defining permanence as a priority and in directing resources to permanency efforts and to preparation of youth in foster care for adulthood. It is essential that the strengths and challenges of the current policy framework be carefully examined:

- What are the key federal laws that impact permanency planning for youth and preparation for adulthood?
• Are federal and state policy goals regarding permanence and preparation for adulthood consistent with one another?
• To what extent are certain permanence outcomes given incentives and others are not?
• What is the role of kinship care in providing expanded permanency opportunities for youth in foster care?
• How can existing resources through federal, state, and local funding streams be maximized to achieve the best outcomes for youth and support for their families?
• How effective are the relationships among different service systems, particularly child welfare agencies and the courts?
• What is the role of the courts in ensuring that youth in foster care achieve permanence?
• To what extent do courts and child welfare agencies coordinate efforts to ensure that youth have lifelong family connections?

In this section, the authors examine the policy framework created by federal law and state policies as they support and create challenges to achieving permanence for youth in care and preparing them for adulthood, consider the policy framework for kinship care as an important avenue for permanence and preparation of youth for adulthood, and examine the research regarding the court’s role in ensuring that youth have the benefit of permanence and preparation for adulthood.

Practice Responses

Practitioners who work with real youths and real families creatively respond to a range of vexing challenges as they attempt to ensure that each young person has lifelong family connections and is well prepared to transition to adulthood. Their perspectives, their training, and their personal and professional histories may pull them in different directions: some practitioners may place primary emphasis on permanence, whereas others may see the task as preparing youth as fully as possible for life on their own. Practitioners often struggle with balancing the urgency of a youth’s immediate needs and their recognition that the youth’s long-term needs will best be met by family members who understand and are committed to “being there” for her or him. The limited body of evidence-based practice in child welfare adds to the challenges that practitioners face.
In this section, the authors focus on practices aimed at optimizing the two primary paths to legal permanence: reunification and adoption. They explore key strategies that can promote permanence: services that support youth in remaining safely with their families, family-involvement meetings to promote the engagement of family when youth enter foster care, the community as a resource for preventive services and ongoing support for youth and their families, and youth’s development of life skills within a family context. The final chapter in this section presents a series of case vignettes illustrating the application of many of these practices.

This volume concludes with a chapter that synthesizes current evidence-based policies and practices that support family permanence for youth and outlines the need for additional research in several critical areas. It advocates for a deeper understanding of “what works” and the implementation of evidence-based policies and practices to ensure that when child welfare systems close youth’s cases, they leave foster care to permanent families.

REFERENCES