



Dave Thomas
Foundation
for Adoption®

Forever Families for Children in Foster Care

Preparing Youth for Permanency Through Meaningful Relationships

National Webinar

June 25, 2026



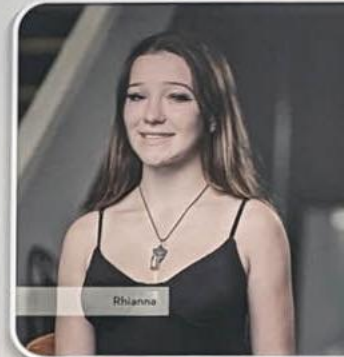
Johnathan



"My recruiter... Johnathan, adopted at 13"



Kenya



Rhianna

... to spend a lot of time with his family tree and finding us... ever grateful. If it wasn't for her, we could have gone anywhere."
— Erin, adopted Nathaniel at 13



Erin and Nathaniel





WELCOME

Presenters



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Here are a few reminders for our session today:

Recording

This session is being recorded and will be shared later.

Q & A

Use the Q & A function to ask questions.

Evaluation

Give us your feedback at the end of the webinar by completing the survey.

CEUs

In the feedback survey, include your license number for continuing education credit.



Learning Objectives

- Understand the importance of early permanency preparation
- Identify key strategies for tailoring permanency preparation
- Incorporate trauma-informed practices in permanency preparation
- Engage supportive adults in the permanency process



Mission

Dramatically increase the number of adoptions of children waiting in North America's foster care systems.

Vision

Every child will have a permanent home and a loving family.

We believe

every child is **ADOPTABLE.**



In North America ...

390,000+
CHILDREN

are in
foster care

130,000+
CHILDREN

are waiting to
be adopted

20,000+
CHILDREN

age out of care
every year without
a family





Impact of Aging Out of Foster Care

Without the support and safety net of a permanent family*:

- **1 in 5** youth will be homeless after age 18
- Only **50%** will be employed at age 24
- Less than **3%** will earn a college degree
- **70%** of former female foster youth will be pregnant by age 21
- **1 in 4** youth will experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), equal to or higher than U.S. military veterans

For every young person who ages out of care, taxpayers pay **\$300,000** in social costs (public assistance, lost wages, systems involvement)





Hannah's Story



Dave Thomas
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“

If I was adopted,
my life would have been
10 times better,
10 times easier.”

HANNAH

Aged Out of Foster Care



Youth Currently Served by WWK

WWK Caseloads

6,163
children on
WWK caseloads

14
average
age

78%
part of a
sibling group

71%
at least one
special need

Prior to WWK

3.1
average years
spent in care

5.6
average number of
placements

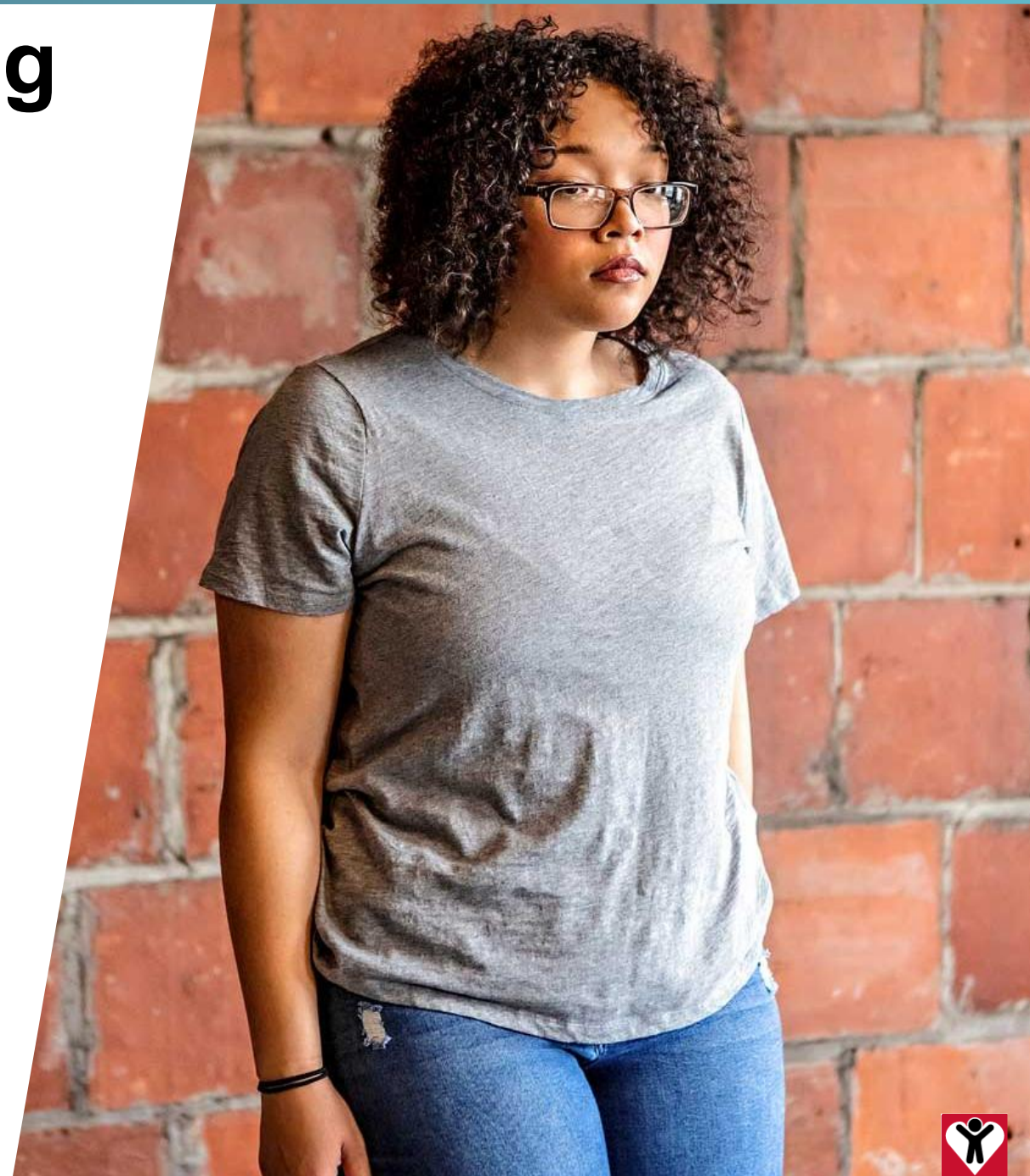
86%
had minimal or
no adoption
recruitment efforts

22%
had a dissolved or
disrupted adoption



Common Themes Among Youth Waiting for Permanency

- **Loss** of relationships
- Overstretched systems
- **“Resistance”** to permanency
- Congregate care
- Unrealistic expectations that youth will adjust quickly into typical family life



Key Elements of Permanency

- Defining **permanency**
 - Lifelong sense of belonging in a family
- Permanency is a process, not an event
- Early preparation matters:
 - Builds trust and belonging
 - Stronger youth voice
 - Better outcomes





Legal Permanency

Legal permanency is defined as a child's relationship with a parenting adult recognized by law.

This includes:

- Reunification
- Guardianship
- Adoption
- Tribal Customary Adoption
- SOUL Family (some states)





Youth Engagement and Permanency Preparation

Helpful Tips for Permanency Conversations

Do

- Practice ahead of time
- Ask future-oriented questions
- Help youth understand *all* permanency options
- Make space for questions
- Honor that feelings and decisions may evolve

Don't

- Use jargon or emotionally charged language
- Mistake independence for not wanting or needing a family
- Allow goal changes to derail relationship-focused work
- Give up!



Your Relationship Matters

- Professional relationships with youth can be transformational
- Establish an authentic relationship where trust can grow
- Openness and honesty are essential to building trust



“

It was a surprise to find that someone thought that they matter. It was a bigger surprise when this turned out to be more than just words: when a worker showed up even when the youth did not want to see them; showed up again and again; kept showing up even after the young person had done something wrong; showed up when not expected (to celebrate even a small accomplishment, or to help during a crisis); and challenged the youth about negative behaviors when it might be easier to say nothing. All of these experiences differed from what the youth had come to take for granted — that they didn't matter, and that anyone allowed to become important would soon leave. Eventually, the young people began to matter more to themselves ...”

— Center for the Study of Social Policy (2017)





Meeting Youth Where They Are

- Common fears and resistance
- Effects of trauma
- Developmental, cognitive and emotional stages



Use a Trauma-Responsive Lens with Youth

- Helps youth understand their experiences and inspire hope for their future
- Amplifies youth voice
- Drives meaningful engagement
- Creates space for honest conversations
- Recognizes the importance of birth family and supports reconnection to meaningful relationships
- Leads to **better outcomes**





Equipping Adults to Support Permanency Preparation

Meaningful Relationships in Permanency

- Shift from a **placement** mindset to a **people** mindset
- Model healthy relationships
- Practice makes progress

LOVE





Building Trust and Empowering Families

- Prioritize open communication
- Use a strengths-based lens
- Provide ongoing, culturally responsive support
- Address systemic challenges
- Support safe and permanent reunification
- Connect to post-permanency efforts

Sources: Casey Family Programs (2023)
Child Welfare Information Gateway (2022)
Child Welfare Information Gateway (2025b)



Building the Youth's Network

- Network can be expansive
- What is their **yes**?
- Network members can help youth prepare for permanency
- Long-term support for the youth and their permanency resource



Use a Trauma-Responsive Lens with Kin

- Acknowledge trauma
- Validate emotions
- Build trust through transparency and consistent follow-through
- Empower families
- Promote autonomy
- Connect families to supportive resources



Scenario: Kai

- Kai is a 16-year-old honor student who plays on his high school's soccer team and loves cars. He says he is not interested in adoption. The first time you mentioned adoption he said, "I just want to age out" and changed the subject.
- Through your deep dive into his case file and conversations with Kai's caseworker, you found out that he has a strong relationship with his paternal grandmother, Cara.
- Cara told the caseworker that she cannot take care of Kai because of her age and medical conditions. She has discouraged Kai from being adopted, because she does not want to lose her relationship with him.





Reflection Questions

1. What developmental, cognitive or emotional needs should I consider when planning permanency preparation activities or conversations with this youth?
2. What permanency preparation efforts could I use with this youth?
3. What other adults can help prepare this youth for permanency, and how can I engage them?





Summary

- Needs to consider
 - Teen brains rely on emotional decision-making
 - Misconceptions about permanency
- Preparation tips
 - Encourage future-oriented thought
 - Keep hope and the conversation about permanency alive
 - Share Youth Voices videos
- Who can help
 - Grandma
 - Service team
 - Coaches or teachers




Youth and Family Centered Practice

- Wendy's Wonderful Kids®
- Youth Centered Permanency Roundtables (YCPRT)
- Family Team Decision Making
- Adoption-competent therapist
 - <https://adoptionsupport.org/nti/>
- *Voices Matter: Practical Tips for Discussing Permanency with Youth*
resource



A man wearing a black hooded jacket, brown pants, and bright green sneakers stands on the steps of a porch. The porch has a white door with a decorative glass panel and a window to the right. The porch is decorated with two wicker chairs and a small table. The ground is covered in snow, and there are dark green bushes in the foreground. The text "Sean's Story" is overlaid in white on the man's torso.

Sean's Story



Dave Thomas
Foundation
for Adoption

“

I feel safe here.”

Sean

Adopted at 15



Key Takeaways



- Start early and prepare WITH the youth
- Tailor preparation to each youth's needs and experiences
- Actively involve the youth's support network
- Permanency preparation is holistic — not a single task or tool
- This is not a new tool or assessment; it builds on practices you are already doing, approaching everyday interactions with youth and families through a permanency focused lens.



Questions





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THANK YOU!



davethomasfoundation.org

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