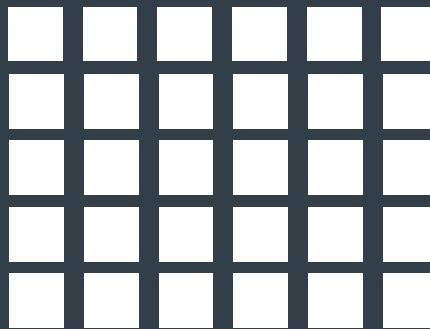


## TYPS Sheet for Foster Families

May 2019

**A**s foster parents, you play a critical role in shaping the lives of youth in foster care. The hard work you do on a daily basis to create a sense of belonging in the family, meet youth's needs, make space for personal growth, and help them have a normal childhood greatly impacts their future outcomes.

In 2017, we interviewed **30 young adults** formerly in Texas foster care for the **Texas Youth Permanency Study (TYPS)**.



Youth had a lot to say about their relationships with foster parents and how you can help them move through the system successfully and contribute to their wellbeing.

## Recommendations from the TYPS Research Team:

One of the most powerful messages youth have voiced so far is that nurturing, supportive and committed relationships with foster parents are essential to their success and wellbeing while in care, and as they transition to young adulthood. Based on what youth shared with us, we have come up with 3 ways you can help youth achieve better outcomes, have authentic relationships, and feel more normal within the system.

**1** Help youth build and maintain authentic relationships.

**2** Support youth's personal growth.

**3** Help youth have a normal childhood.



Read the full report at [UTYPS.org](http://UTYPS.org)

# 1

## Help youth build and maintain authentic relationships.

Youth of all ages crave attachment with adults. Unfortunately, youth in foster care experience a tremendous amount of instability which is exacerbated by frequent placement changes. The more you can help youth create and maintain positive relationships with adults, the more likely they are to feel prepared and supported in adulthood. If they have strong and healthy relationships, they are less likely to return to or rely on the unhealthy relationships that can exist within their family of origin. Ask youth about adults in their lives they've had a good connection with, where they felt safe and supported. These adults could be church members, teachers, parents of friends, and so on. Advocate for youth to maintain a connection with these adults. While these adults may not be suitable placements for legal or personal reasons, that doesn't mean they can't play a supportive role in a youth's life.

You can also personally create authentic relationships for youth. You can be their important adult, by creating a nurturing, supportive and long-term relationship where they can find safety and support as they grow into young adulthood. Since a significant proportion of older foster youth will age out of care, this relationship can be a real life-saver for them.

Another way to build connection is to nurture a sense of belonging in your home. Youth need to feel a strong sense that they are wanted by their family. When describing their foster homes, youth in our study often felt they did not fit into the home or family. Being wanted, included and feeling "like one of the family" is a key factor in helping youth feel safe and secure. Think about the ways in which youth in your family are included or not included in family activities, such as travel, portraits and family gatherings. Be mindful of these differences and try to include youth as much as possible.

- Advocate for youth to maintain connections with adults they identify as safe and important.
- Build a supportive and long-term relationship.
- Nurture a sense of family belonging in your home.

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This last foster mom allowed me to continue going to my church. She wanted to get to know my support network. She really involved herself in the things that meant everything to me.

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I go by and see my foster mom. If I'm passing in that area, I'll stop by her house or I'll stop at her job and just say hello and see how she's doing. She always tells me she is very proud of me from what I've become.

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# 2

## Support youth's personal growth.

- Help youth build self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Create a supportive and encouraging environment.
- Advocate in order to help them get their needs met.

One theme we heard throughout youth interviews was how impactful it was to have foster parents who helped them grow as a person. Youth very much appreciated their foster parents' efforts to build their self-confidence by gently challenging them to try new activities, explore their leadership skills and take on new projects. It's important to understand that a history of trauma can impact a youth's sense of competency and self-esteem. When you're in an environment that does not feel safe (emotionally or physically), all of your energy is channeled into survival with little left over to explore the self and to discover strengths and competencies. Youth need you to help them venture past survival, and this happens when they feel safe and supported.

An encouraging environment is one where youth know they can make mistakes, they can fail, and they will not be shamed, but instead lifted up to try again. Making mistakes are a part of life and a part of finding success.

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One of the families was probably the best people I've ever met in my entire life. Like, they were super supportive. They always tried to get us out of our comfort zone... they put a lot of focus on us. They made sure that we did things that we were interested in, that we liked to do. They were good for school. Like, if you were failing, they would give you tutoring. They were really supportive.

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Youth reported how supportive and meaningful it was for them when their foster parents were able to forgive their mistakes, seeing the “good” in them instead of focusing on their challenges. Children build their self-esteem by having a caregiver who can reflect a positive sense of self back to them. Many children who have been through trauma did not experience this, and their self-esteem is more fragile. Although it’s understandable to want youth to experience consequences for their actions, the manner in which this is done can make all the difference in creating positive self-worth.

Youth also felt a real connection to foster parents who advocated for them around their needs. Having a caregiver who recognizes your needs, and makes a strong effort to meet them, can significantly impact your relationship with them as well as feelings of self-esteem. It matters that youth see you advocating more at court or school. Even if the outcome isn’t ideal, youth greatly appreciate the effort and goes a long way in knowing someone cares for them and they are worth the effort. You can also find ways to help youth improve in an area of life that is challenging to them, like school.

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Well, they did everything that, I guess, a parent would. I don't know how to explain it. And they always showed that they cared. They took us places. They got us stuff we needed, wanted, stuff that they didn't have to. Whenever we was going through, like, a hard time or whatever, they would sit and talk to me and try to get my head on straight.

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### 3

#### Help youth have a normal childhood.

- Help youth experience typical teen activities.
- Create a home where all children feel they are treated similarly.
- Help youth that are “aging out” obtain essential documents and skills for young adulthood.

Creating a home with normal childhood experiences can have a significant impact on well-being. Youth in foster care already feel different, often like outsiders, so creating opportunities in which they can experience a “typical” childhood is essential for building self-esteem and positive relationships. Youth in our study reported that the inability to participate in normal teen activities interfered with their social development and negatively impacted their relationship with others outside of the foster home. Although there are some limitations placed on youth in foster care that are dictated by the state, there are still many ways you can support their independence and adolescent development. Given how important this is, it’s worth the effort to find creative solutions. For those times when state rules don’t allow for a “typical” teen experience, it’s important to be transparent and communicate the reasons for these limits, while showing empathy for their situation.

The lack of feeling normal can be compounded when youth feel other children in the home are treated better than them, or given preferential treatment. Youth understand things aren’t always equal between children, but they cited many examples of situations where they were treated in a way that made them feel excluded or “less than.” This has a huge effect on how they view themselves, including whether they feel worthy of love. One of the ways you can help youth is to ensure that they are not treated differently than the biological children in your home.

Finally, a huge part of feeling normal is being prepared to be an independent young adult. Many of the things we do to support our own children’s launch into young adulthood are often overlooked for youth in foster care. Don’t take for granted that they will learn everything they need in independent living skills classes or that their caseworker will take care of things – or even that they have essential documents such as birth certificates. Foster youth need you to advocate for them and help them secure the skills and essentials necessary to live independently. You can make a big difference by double-checking they really know how to do essential things. Most importantly, by building authentic relationships with youth as they approach young adulthood, you welcome them to check back in with you and rely on you for emotional and practical guidance as needed. Having a secure base to come back to is an essential part of being successful in life.

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I never got to go to football games, never homecoming – I think I got to talk on the phone maybe twice, but in terms of like having friends over or anything like that, it was no. They really wanted to separate me from my old friends and my old life, and to some degree, I understand that part because I wasn't making the best choices in the past.

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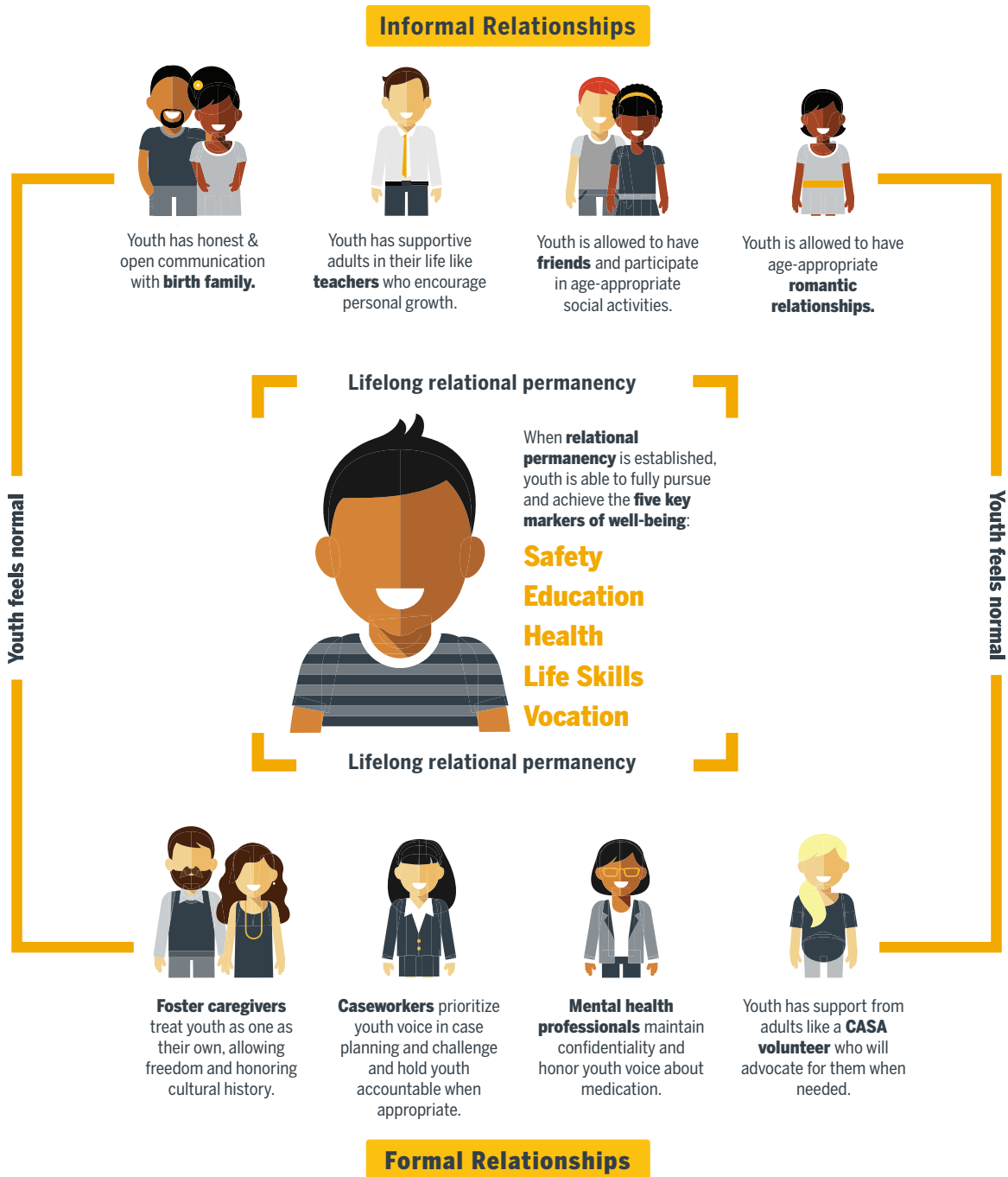
There was an undoubtable hierarchy – you know – you have foster care treatment and then you have biological kids' treatment. The bio kids were allowed to eat in the living room and their rooms. The foster kids had to only eat in the kitchen.

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# Authentic Relationships Matter Most

Based on the 2017 TYPS pilot study, we believe through **informal** and **formal** relationships youth can begin to feel normal which creates **relational permanency**.



## About TYPS

The Texas Youth Permanency Study builds evidence to better understand the realities of former foster youth entering young adulthood. In doing so, we are finding new ways of understanding permanency that will create foundations for youth to thrive in young adulthood regardless of how they leave foster care. In our pilot study, we interviewed 30 former foster youth in 2017 and released the pilot study report in March 2018. The purpose of this pilot study was to: 1) gather preliminary information around our conceptualizations of legal, relational and physical permanence; and 2) test our survey and interview protocols. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board, The University of Texas at Austin (protocol #2016-10-0140).