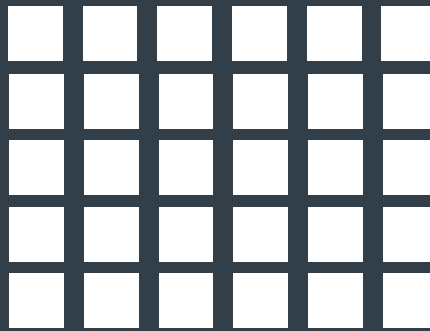


## TYPS Sheet for Birth Families

November 2018

**W**e heard one thing over and over from youth in our study. And while what we heard probably won't come as a surprise to you, it's worth repeating: **You are important to your child.** You play a special role in helping your child become a successful adult. Even after a long separation, a child's longing for a good relationship with you is still there.

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 their birth families and how much these relationships matter to them, even if there have been problems in the past.

## Recommendations from the TYPS Research Team:

Youth we interviewed had valuable ideas about what they need from you, whether they return home from foster care to live with you, continue to have contact with you while they grow up in foster care, or reconnect with you later. Based on what was shared with us, we came up with 4 things you can do to have a good connection to your child and support them to grow up strong.

- 1** Communicate openly and honestly with your child.
- 2** Assure your child that he or she isn't responsible for what happened.
- 3** Work on solving the problems.
- 4** Understand that it takes time to rebuild a positive relationship.



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

# 1

## Communicate openly and honestly with your child.

- Your child needs to understand all the reasons they're in foster care
- Your child probably knows more about what's happening in the family than you think
- Your child may feel like he or she isn't valued when you won't talk about serious things with him or her

Six youth said they had maintained communication with their birth family throughout their stay in foster care or when they reconnected with their birth family later. Youth said that open and honest communication with their birth family about the reasons they were in foster care helped make those relationships better.

Fourteen youth had mixed feelings about their relationship with their birth family. One of the main reasons was their birth family's reluctance to talk about why the youth was in foster care.

It can be very hard to talk to your child about family problems. Usually, adults want to protect youth by keeping information from them. The problem is that when we protect children in this way, they don't feel heard. Being in foster care is a really big deal to youth. Talking about the hard stuff helps youth make sense of all that's happened to them and gives them an opportunity to express how they feel about the situation. When youth aren't able to have these kinds of conversations with you, they may get very confused, sad, or anxious, or they may act out their feelings. This can keep them from having good relationships with other people and prevent them from being successful in adulthood.

Hearing what the youth has to say might make you feel sad or anxious, too. You might even want to talk to someone you trust for support, or to think through how you can have an open and honest conversation with your child without becoming overwhelmed. It might help to write a letter to your child to get all your thoughts out. The most important thing to do is start the conversation about the reasons the youth is in foster care, even if you have to start small.

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Right now [my mother]'s like my favorite person. I'll go over there and she'll have food ready for me. We'll sit there. We'll have a conversation. I go over there with the intent to stay for 25 minutes, and four hours later [we are still talking].

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[My family] had all this time to come back into my life. And then they pop out of nowhere. Then when I asked them different questions about like why did this happen as a kid? Why this and this and that? It's like they just failed to answer any of my questions. I asked my grandmother, I asked my mother, and it's just like they were very closed-mouth about it, and they just said like, "Okay, everything's supposed to be fine now."

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# 2

## Assure your child that he or she isn't responsible for what happened.

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We had a nice little long talk about what was going through her mind and she basically said that she wasn't mentally capable to take care of us. She battled depression, which I didn't know. She had suicidal thoughts, bipolar disorder, and she just wasn't fit to take care of us. So, she did what was best in her eyes and it was to terminate rights of us.

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It just bothered me a lot because [my mother] always, she always felt like, you know, get over it. That was her main thing, was that it already happened, get over it. Like, she wanted to sweep it under the rug and like get past it and so I had got to a breaking point where I was like, if you don't want to talk about it, we don't have anything to talk about. Because it's an issue and we should be able to talk about it, but my mom is not the type of person that you can approach. She's unapproachable.

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- Your child may blame himself or herself for bad things that happen in the family
- Your child needs to hear directly from you that he or she wasn't at fault for the choices you made
- Your child needs you to take responsibility for your actions and acknowledge the impact on him or her

Families are made up of human beings. All of us make mistakes. The reasons your child was placed in foster care were probably complicated. Maybe you weren't the only one responsible, or maybe you don't agree with all of the reasons the decision was made that your child would live with other caregivers. Maybe allowing your child to grow up with other caregivers was the most loving thing you could do for him or her. Maybe you've made a lot of good changes in your life. Your child may see your efforts, but their pain or experience is still real. Acknowledge this and let your children speak freely about the ways in which they are hurt. You may not always agree, but your child has a right to his or her feelings.

Most importantly, if you did something wrong, say so. Own what happened to your child, or your part in things. Apologize for the hurt your actions caused your child. Otherwise, your child may begin to believe that what happened to them was because of who they are. They may even think that they were being punished because

there's something wrong with them. This can lead to depression, low self-esteem, and the youth feeling as though his or her actions won't make a difference. The youth may become helpless or unmotivated as a result. On the other hand, your child is much more likely to take responsibility for what is in their control when you accept responsibility for what was in your control. You can help them move forward in their lives when you relieve them of any blame they feel over what happened.

Like almost all parents, you want your child to be happy. Knowing you've caused hurt can be very painful. Feelings of guilt may be so overwhelming that it's hard to admit that you've done something wrong. Accepting responsibility for your actions can be a really scary step to take. But doing so can show your child that you're willing to put their needs first.

### 3

#### Work on solving the problems.

- Your child wants you to be healthy and to have healthy relationships with others
- Your child needs you to stop the behaviors that brought them into foster care even if parental rights are terminated
- Your child may make the hard decision that it's too harmful for him or her to have contact with you if nothing has changed

Six youth told us they enjoyed good relationships with their birth family and had regular contact with them. These youth stated they were willing to reconnect with their birth family once they left foster care because their family's situation had improved.

Six youth indicated they had poor relationships with their birth family because of past parental abuse and neglect. The most common reason youth reported for having a poor relationship with their birth family was ongoing parental substance abuse. Youth stated they wanted to distance themselves from birth parents who had substance abuse problems.

The kinds of problems that lead to a child being in foster care can be hard to solve. You may have worked on solving the problem before, but you haven't been as successful as you or your child needed. If this is the case, it's worth another try. With commitment and effort, success is possible. While your child may be reluctant to trust you at first, eventually, he or she may respond positively if you consistently act in a healthy way. When you are healthy, your child can start to let go of their worry about you and the hurt they feel. This gives them the room they need to focus on becoming healthy adults themselves.

You may not be ready to solve the problem just yet. If this is the case, be honest with yourself and your child. Don't give your child false hope, only to disappoint him or her later. Understand that if you're not ready to solve the problem, this may mean that your child won't be willing to be as close to you as you'd like. You can still help your child let go of the hard stuff by being open with your child about the reasons he or she was placed in foster care and by taking ownership of what happened in the past. As tough as it is, being upfront about where you are can help your child move forward in life.

“ We didn't have too good of a relationship. I tried to keep the connection while we were in foster care. I think the main reason I tried to keep that connection was because of my grandmother. My goal was always to go back home and it was because of my grandma but after I aged out of foster care, I did try to reach out to my mom and she was still in the position that she had always been in. She was doing drugs and always drunk and I just didn't want to associate myself with her anymore. So, we've really never – I haven't talked to her in years. ”

### 4

#### Understand that it takes time to rebuild a positive relationship.

“

I'm still very close to [my mother] today actually, but I do have to try to keep healthy distance. I can't let her get too controlling or too involved. I have to maintain some distance. I mean, yeah, our relationship now is pretty much to where I'll say, 'You wanna go get a burger at five [o'clock,]' and she'll say, 'Okay, yeah, cool,' and I'll do that once a week or once every two weeks.

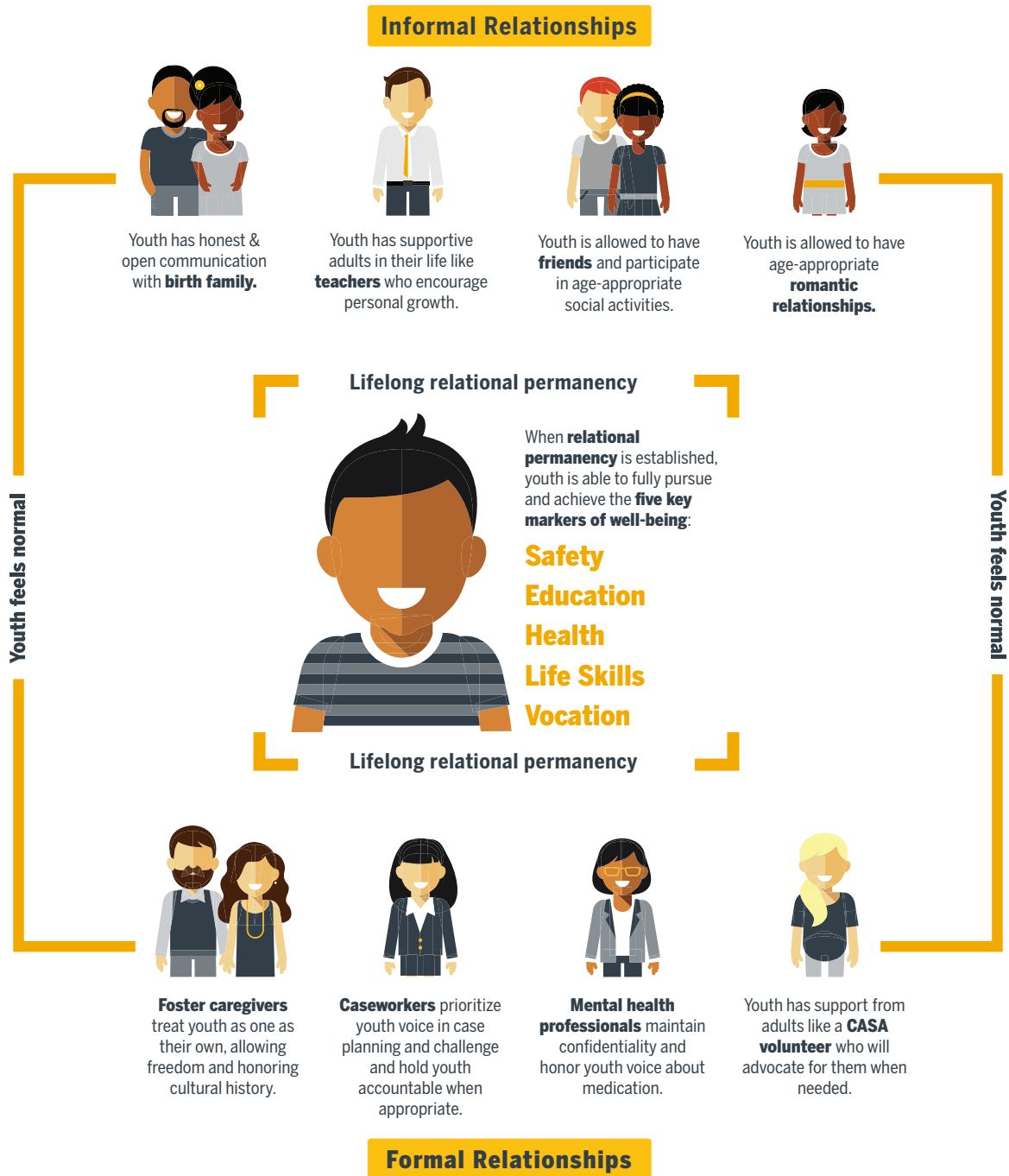
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- Your child needs you to put him or her first
- Your child needs you to show over time that you're trustworthy
- Your child needs you to respect the boundaries he or she sets

Your child may be willing to meet you part way, but the work is yours to do. You have to make a commitment to improve things and live up to that commitment without expectation that your child's feelings will change. The timetable for rebuilding a relationship with your child isn't in your hands. You may want to try to make up for what happened as quickly as possible and rush the process too much. Your child will release their pain more slowly than you may want their forgiveness. It will take your child time and space to heal. There is always a chance for something better if you are doing the work. So don't give up. If your relationship with your child means something to you, keep working on yourself and reaching out in healthy ways.

# 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). Sponsored by the Reissa Foundation and The Simmons Foundation.