

Specialized Permanency Services



The first in a series of briefs analyzing the scale and impact of specialized permanency services for children in foster care

Specialized permanency services build social connections as a protective factor for children in foster care to mitigate the devastating impacts of disconnection and loneliness. Research from Casey Family Programs reveals that youth in foster care are twice as likely as United States war veterans to experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The YMCA's specialized permanency services combine family finding, engagement, and grief and loss models to help children and supportive adults in San Diego County build long-lasting, healthy relationships. During the past 3 years of implementation, the YMCA Permanent Connections program blended evidence-based models to identify and develop permanent social connections for child welfare and probation-involved children. Strengthening social connections meets a critical need systems are not always prepared to address: a network of lifelong relationships that provides love, belonging, and deep commitment to each child.

Results and Findings

- ❖ More connections were discovered the longer a child stayed in the Permanent Connections program. Three months in the program yielded an average of 21 connections, and at least 12 months in the program resulted in an average of 24 connections per child.
- ❖ It takes an average of 1 year to reach network stage, when social connections become trusted relationships that help the child heal from trauma. Getting to the network stage is critical for achieving legal and/or relational permanency.
- ❖ The program cultivates a safe space for networks to grow without the pressures of the child welfare system. More connections were present at Family Decision Meetings and Family Group Conferences, 9.8 and 5 respectively compared to 1 connection at Child Welfare meetings, engaging the network in the process of decision-making and taking ownership in supporting the child.

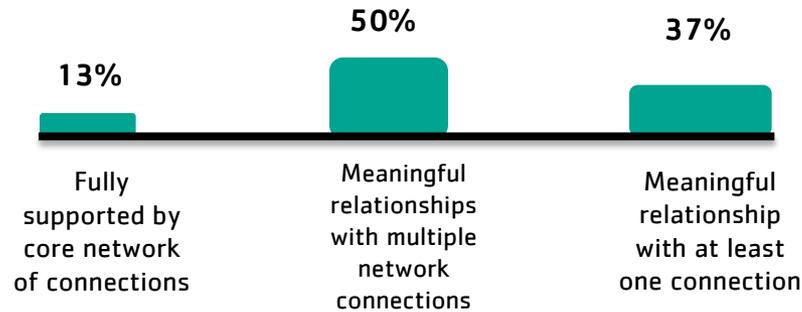
The program found 2,821 potential connections for 112 children.

Source of Discovery	Number of Connections Discovered	Average Number of Connection Discovered per Child
Known at Referral*	531	4.83
Seneca Search	1,089	19.11
File Mining	690	8.96
Network Member	229	5.20
Other	106	2.94
Internet Search	83	16.60
Child Activity	47	3.13
Social Media	46	2.09

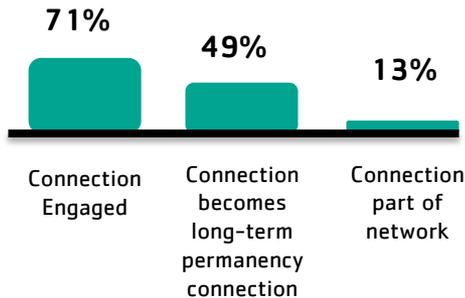
*See full report for operational definition of 'known at referral'.

Permanency Outcomes

Of the 49 cases that closed after Family Finding efforts, **30 children** achieved relational permanency. Of those, the following occurred:



Level of engagement between connection and child



Barriers and Opportunities

Of the 49 cases closed after Family Finding efforts, 11 children received the full scope of services and proceeded through the program without any system-level barriers. Misalignment in practice orientation and organizational priorities between Permanent Connections and CWS/Probation contributed to the limited number of children receiving the full scope of services. Some agency staff were reluctant to approve YMCA staff contact with relatives, impacting the staff's ability to build the children's network. When agency staff were collaborative, YMCA staff and the children had more opportunities to have contact with family and process emotions, increasing the chances of building the social connections vital to heal from trauma.

Recommendations

The program findings illuminate opportunities for stakeholders to increase the chances children in foster care develop social connections.

- ❖ **Engage key decision makers in a formal process that embraces opportunities to reimagine the permanency landscape:** Key decision makers can influence the culture of existing systems and encourage the adoption of the new, collaborative practices necessary between the external partner, county Social Worker, child, and professional team for successful permanency work via family finding and engagement.
- ❖ **Implement policies that support expedited processes and information sharing:** Report findings support the need for processes that facilitate clearing of connections and informing Permanent Connections staff of changes to the child's care plan to maintain the momentum necessary in building a child's network and facilitate legal or relational permanency.
- ❖ **Minimize system-level barriers and mutually agree on importance of social connections:** When systemic barriers are diminished, Permanent Connections staff are able to act with urgency, maintain the momentum in connecting the family and child, and communicate that family relationships are valued. The challenges identified in the report are consistent with the experiences of other external partners, and research from the field can inform ways to expedite the work timeline and serve more children.

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The YMCA of San Diego County is dedicated to improving the quality of human life and to helping all people realize their fullest potential through the development of the spirit, mind and body.