

Social work research explores the effects of 'enduring relationships' for older youth in foster care

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Historically, if youth in foster care didn't have a biological or adoptive parent to turn to at age 18, they were released from the child welfare

system, often with few resources and even less support. But in 2008, a federal law was passed that gave states the option to extend the foster care age up to 21. While this policy change gives foster youth more time to transition into adulthood, many of them still lack the social support they need to successfully leave foster care and thrive.

That reality led researchers like School of Social Work Associate Professor Nate Okpych to investigate the issues that affect the nearly 93,000 [youth](#) aged 14 or older who are in foster care in the United States on a given day. These [young people](#) are more likely than their peers to experience a difficult transition to adulthood.

"When they hit their 21st birthday, they leave foster care and it's not guaranteed that young people have long-lasting relationships that many other young people not in foster have with parents, families, siblings, mentors, church friends, and others," says Okpych. Without these relationships, foster youth may be on their own to manage challenges with education, work, housing, food, and other needs.

To explore the effects of long-lasting, supportive relationships on foster youth, Okpych embarked on one of the first large-scale representative studies of its kind to date. His findings—published in the journal [Social Service Review](#)—could influence child [welfare](#) policy on foster youth, with the goal of transforming their outcomes and lives beyond foster care.

The study

To explore the role of relationships in the lives of foster youth transitioning into adulthood, Okpych and his research colleagues analyzed data collected from a representative group of more than 700 youth in California, the state with the largest foster youth population in the country. These youth were participants in the CalYOUTH Study,

which evaluated the impact of extending the foster care age limit on youth's outcomes in early adulthood.

In interviews conducted at ages 17, 19, 21, and 23, the researchers asked the youth to name people they could turn to for support. They also queried the youth about the types of support they received, such as emotional support to help them cope with a life problem, practical support like someone they could ask for a ride or borrow money from, and informational support like advice about important decisions.

If the study participants named the same individual at 17 and 21, the researchers considered that an "enduring" relationship, defined as a relationship with an individual who has a long-standing presence in their life and who is a reliable source of support. For youth who have typically experienced several relationship disruptions during childhood, these lasting relationships can be critical. "If they have an enduring relationship—someone in their life that will still be there to support them even when the [child welfare system](#) falls away—that's really important," he says.

The researchers found that slightly less than half—or 48%—of the youth studied had an enduring relationship at a point in their lives when the safety net of the child welfare agency was no longer available to them. Most youth had only one enduring relationship, commonly with a biological family member or someone they described as family. That means about half did not have such a [relationship](#).

Okpych also found that there were notable differences in terms of race. Youth who identified as Native American or Black were less likely than peers to have enduring relationships. "It's concerning because these young people leave care," he notes. "Some of them will not have relationships that have lasted the test of time and have been there for them in the past."

Enduring relationships had real consequences for foster youth, reducing the risk of negative outcomes in early adulthood, such as food insecurity, economic hardship, and homelessness. They were also more likely to experience positive outcomes, such as having greater earnings and finishing some college. Surprisingly, the number of individuals the youth said they had in their network was not a key factor. "It's really about the enduring quality of the relationships—that you have people that have been there with you, through thick and thin, over a period of time," he says.

From independence to interdependence

One of the main charges of the child welfare system is help youth establish "legal permanence," which means they are reunified with their family or adopted by someone who is legally responsible for them. Another aim for the child welfare system is to help transition-age youth develop independent living skills. With a child welfare case worker, youth create independent living plans, which include goals focused on education and employment, among other objectives.

Yet the study findings suggest that one vital aspect of transitioning into adulthood is often missing from these plans: enduring relationships. "A lot of child welfare scholars say, yes, independent living skills are important, but relationships are also important for developing interdependence," Okpych says. "And some reunifications and adoptions, which are marked as [positive outcomes](#) from the child welfare system's perspective, are not always positive and do not always last."

Co-author Jenna Powers, '23 Ph.D., agrees. "This study makes a convincing argument for the importance of child welfare practice, programs, and policy focusing more on relational permanence," says Powers, who is now assistant professor at Western Carolina University.

Considering the benefits of enduring relationships for foster youth, identifying and strengthening these connections—which are a form of social capital—could become a required part of transitional living plans. Case workers and youth could incorporate enduring relationships into the plans and even include a [support](#) person in the process.

This shift could also lead to changes in the way that [child](#) welfare agencies engage with [foster youth](#) more broadly, focusing on youth voice and more collaborative decision-making. Okpych is keeping his eye on pilot research that will center youth in the planning of their lives and futures. "One of the areas is going to be forming relationships, having someone in their life that can be there for them after they exit [foster care](#)."

More information: Nathanael J. Okpych et al, Relationships That Persist and Protect: The Role of Enduring Relationships on Early-Adult Outcomes among Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care, *Social Service Review* (2023). [DOI: 10.1086/724736](https://doi.org/10.1086/724736)

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