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.

Recommendations from the TYPS Research Team:

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.

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.

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.
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.

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

- 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
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.

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.

I 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.

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.

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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.

**Informal Relationships**

- Youth has honest & open communication with birth family.
- Youth has supportive adults in their life like teachers who encourage personal growth.
- Youth is allowed to have friends and participate in age-appropriate social activities.
- Youth is allowed to have age-appropriate romantic relationships.

**Formal Relationships**

- Foster caregivers treat youth as one as their own, allowing freedom and honoring cultural history.
- Caseworkers prioritize youth voice in case planning and challenge and hold youth accountable when appropriate.
- Mental health professionals maintain confidentiality and honor youth voice about medication.
- Youth has support from adults like a CASA volunteer who will advocate for them when needed.

**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.

Read the full report at UTYPS.org