Measuring Relational Permanence of Youth:

Youth Connections Scale

Center for Advanced Studies
in Child Welfare

University of Minnesota

Relational Permanence and the Youth Connections Scale

Research and practice wisdom confirms the belief that all youth need the support of caring adults. Youth who are placed in foster care often come into placement with connections to adults who are important in their lives; yet, many of these connections are lost while children are in foster care. Legal permanence, such as the reunification, adoption, or transfer of legal guardianship of the youth, remains a critical goal to achieve for youth in child welfare systems. However, in recent years emotional and relational permanence have been introduced as concepts that are equally important. Relational permanence is defined as youth having lifelong connections to caring adults, including at least one adult who will provide a permanent, parent-like connection for that youth (Louisell, 2008). Many experts and scholars now advocate for child welfare agencies to increase their focus on building permanent, supportive connections for youth while in foster care (Charles & Nelson, 2000; Samuels, 2009).

Research findings indicate that the benefits for youth of being connected to supportive adults include positive long-term effects on youths' social, psychological, and financial outcomes, including improved self-esteem, educational achievement, and social skill development (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Perry, 2006). Youth who age out of foster care, or exit care without a permanent parent-like connection, experience increased risk of homelessness, early pregnancy, incarceration, job instability and unemployment, and poverty (Courtney et al., 2001; Hook & Courtney, 2011). Foster youth without supportive connections also experience risks related to their socio-emotional well-being with increased incidence of mental health and behavioral problems, including depression (Barth, 1990).

Alternatively, other studies indicate that youth who reported higher levels of social support from friends and family had improved resilience and developmental outcomes (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). Youth noted an increased sense of self-identity when able to maintain relationships with family and other adults important in their lives (Lenz-Rashid, 2009). Unfortunately, feedback from many former foster youth indicates they felt they had little say in maintaining the most important relationships in their lives (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

> YOUNG PEOPLE, IN GENERAL, NEED THE SAFETY NET OF FINANCIAL, SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT FROM THEIR PARENTS OR PARENT-LIKE FIGURES WELL INTO YOUNG ADULTHOOD.

Research also indicates that many youth seek out relationships with their biological family after leaving foster care (Geenen & Powers, 2007). Organizations and professionals are beginning to recognize the opportunity to work with youth while in foster care to help youth address issues of grief and loss and to help them build positive connections with their families and other supportive adults.

Young people, in general, need the safety net of financial, social and emotional support from their parents or parent-like figures well into young adulthood. This safety net is not always available to young people leaving foster care. *The Youth Connections Scale* is a promising tool for child welfare agencies and organizations to work with youth in strengthening and building a supportive safety net and achieving relational permanence for all youth in foster care.

Based upon a review of current research[1] on the importance of youth connections to caring adults, the *Youth Connections Scale* was developed by the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) at the University of Minnesota in partnership with Anu Family Services. This tool was developed in order to fill a need in child welfare: the need to evaluate and measure the increased efforts of agencies to improve the relational permanence of youth in foster care. This brief report introduces the *Youth Connections Scale*, the pilot validation study of the scale, and strategies for implementing the *Youth Connections Scale* as an evaluative and case planning tool in child welfare.

[1] Development of the support indicators for youth was also informed by panels of practitioners and experts in the field, and by practice tools such as the Permanency Pact, a practice tool developed by young people from FosterClub (2006) and the BEST tool developed by Casey Family Services (Frey, Cushing, Freundlich & Brenner, 2008).

Implementation of the *Youth Connections Scale (YCS)*

The *YCS* can be used as a tool by practitioners, supervisors and evaluators of child welfare practice in a variety of ways. Several suggested uses of the *YCS* are highlighted below.

- The *YCS* can be used at the time of intake to guide the case planning process around strengthening youth connections to caring adults. The tool guides intentional discussion concerning the youth's perception of the number, strength and quality of their relationships to supportive adults. Social workers can use the *YCS* to identify potential strengths for each youth, including identifying specific adults who may support the youth in his/her path to legal permanence.

- Supervisors, who play a key role in achieving desired program outcomes in child welfare, can use the *YCS* to track the efforts of workers as they aim to identify, maintain and strengthen the connections to supportive adults while youth are in care. Using the *YCS* in supervision helps ensure the relational permanence of youth remains a priority in case planning.
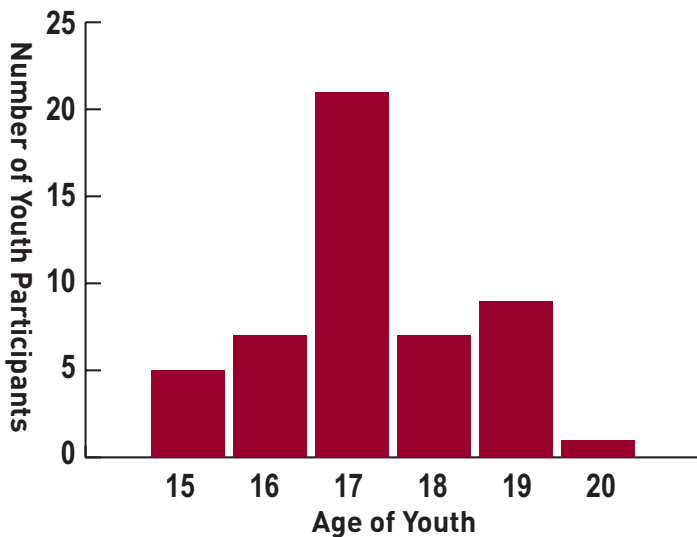
- The tool can be used to evaluate practices and strategies to increase the relational permanence of youth. For example, the *YCS* can be used to measure the level of connection for youth at time of entry and at time of discharge thereby learning if progress was made in improving the overall level of connectedness of youth. The individual subscales of the tool may also be examined for changes in the overall number and strength of adult connections as well as looking at specific types of support youth perceive and how this changes over time.

Pilot Validation Study of Youth Connections Scale

Following the development of the *Youth Connections Scale*, the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare conducted a pilot study to test the validity and reliability of the scale. The study sample included 53 adolescents, aged 15 to 21, who had been in out-of-home care for at least three months (See Figure 1). Participating youth were also cognitively and developmentally able, as assessed by their workers and supervisors, to complete the scale. Subjects were recruited from three public and five private child welfare agencies. *The Youth Connections Scale* is scored from 0 to 100 and consists of four sections which measure:

[1] the number of meaningful connections or relationships the youth has with supportive adults;

[2] the strength of those connections, including the frequency of contact and the consistency of the support the adult provides for the youth;

[3] the specific types of supports that have been identified as most important in the literature and from feedback from former foster youth; and

[4] the overall level of connectedness of foster youth to caring and supportive adults.

Figure 1. Age of Youth in Pilot Validation Study.

Data was collected by the youths' social workers. The social workers assisted the youth in completing the *Youth Connections Scale* at two points in time. Time One (T1) occurred at the convenience of the social worker and the youth. Time Two (T2) occurred between one and two weeks following Time One, to assess the test-retest reliability of the *Youth Connections Scale*. The average total score for the *Youth Connections Scale* at T1 was 52.87 and T2 was 52.75 (See Figure 2). When the youth completed the *Youth Connections Scale* at T1, they also completed a portion of an existing validated scale, the Social Support Behaviors (SSB) Scale that measures a similar construct of supportive relationships (Vaux, Riedel & Stewart, 1987). This allowed for the testing of the concurrent validity of the *Youth Connections Scale*.

Figure 2. Scale Scores in Pilot Validation Study.

	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Average Score	Standard Deviation
Youth Connections Scale – T1	15	83	52.87	16.34
Youth Connections Scale – T2	12	81	52.75	15.94

Results of this pilot study suggest that the *Youth Connections Scale* appears to be a valid and reliable scale to measure the relational permanence of youth in foster care. Results of the test-retest reliability analysis indicated a statistically significant and strong correlation (r=.88, p<.001). As illustrated in Figure 3, each of the subscale scores demonstrated a strong correlation between the first and second testing as well.

Figure 3. Findings of test-retest reliability of Youth Connections Scale.

Subscales and Total	Correlation: Between T1 and T2
Section A: Tools for Youth Connections	.86*
Section B: Number of Supportive Adult Connections	.82*
Section C: Strength of Youth Connections	.72*
Section D: Support Indicators	.82*
Section E: Level of Youth Connection	.77*
Total Score	.88*

Statisically significant correlations, p<.05.

For the test of concurrent validity, results of this test also indicated a statistically signifcant and moderately strong correlation (r=.74, p<.001) when comparing the *Youth Connections Scale* to the Social Support Behaviors Scale (Vaux, Riedel & Stewart, 1987).

Although further testing of the *Youth Connections Scale* with a larger sample of foster youth is needed, the results of the pilot study suggest that this is a useful instrument for child welfare agencies to strengthen and evaluate their practice of creating a safety net for youth of caring and supportive adults.

Youth Connections Scale

(A) Tools for Youth Connections

	Yes	No
Has a genogram or connectedness map been completed with youth?	☐	☐
Has a Lifebook been created with or for the youth?	☐	☐

(B) Number of Supportive Adult Connections: For each category, please write the total number of meaningful relationships that apply for youth at this time.

"Meaningful relationships" are defined by the youth. This would include adults who have some on-going contact with the youth and who can be counted on for some type of support.

	Total # of Adult Relationships for Each Category
Mother (birth, adoptive, stepmother)	
Father (birth, adoptive, stepfather)	
Adult siblings	
Other adult relatives	
Current foster parent	
Former foster parent	
Current or former social worker	
Current or former teacher	
Current or former therapist, counselor or psychologist	
Pastor, rabbi or other spiritual leader	
An adult friend, mentor or sponsor	
Other adults (Please list relationships):	

(C) Strength of Youth Connections: Indicate the strength of the relationship between the youth and adult right now.

In categories where there is more than one person, choose the most meaningful relationship and answer about that person. You can list up to two additional adults in the last two rows. Circle the best response for each row.

Very Weak: No Contact

Weak: Infrequent contact; youth can't count on this adult for support

Moderate: Some contact with this adult but may not be consistent; youth feels a connection but can't count on this adult all the time

Strong: Contact at least once per month; youth feels a connection of the heart, mind or spirit with this person; youth can usually count on this person

Very Strong: Contact at least once per week; youth feels a long-term connection of the heart, mind or spirit with this person; youth can count on this person to be there for them when needed

N/A: Not applicable because adult is deceased or youth has no siblings

	Very Weak	Weak	Moderate	Strong	Very Strong	N/A
Parent 1 (birth, adoptive or step mother or father)	0	1	2	3	4	N/A
Parent 2 (birth, adoptive or step mother or father)	0	1	2	3	4	N/A
Siblings	0	1	2	3	4	N/A
Other adult relatives	0	1	2	3	4	N/A
Other caring adult identified by youth:	0	1	2	3	4	N/A
Other caring adult identified by youth:	0	1	2	3	4	N/A

(D) Support Indicators: Answer yes or no for each indicator. *These do not have to be from the same adult.*

You have an adult in your life whom you will be able to count on for the following support after you leave foster care:

Yes	No	Indicator
☐	☐	Providing a home to go to for the holidays
☐	☐	Providing an emergency place to stay
☐	☐	Providing cash in times of emergency
☐	☐	Help with job search assistance or career counseling, or providing a reference for youth
☐	☐	Help with finding an apartment or co-signing a lease
☐	☐	Help with school *(homework, re-enrolling in school, help in applying to colleges)*
☐	☐	Assisting with daily living skills, such as cooking, budgeting, paying bills and housecleaning
☐	☐	Providing storage space during transition times
☐	☐	Emotional support – a caring adult to talk to
☐	☐	Sharing in or supporting experiences of youth's cultural and spiritual background
☐	☐	Checking in on youth regularly – to see how they are doing
☐	☐	Assisting with medical appointments so youth does not have to experience that alone
☐	☐	Assisting with finding and accessing community resources.
☐	☐	A home to go for occasional family meals
☐	☐	Help providing transportation *(help with purchasing a car)* or figuring out public transportation
☐	☐	Someone to send care packages at college
☐	☐	Assisting with purchasing cell phone and service *(for example, youth is added to a family plan)*.
☐	☐	A place to do laundry
☐	☐	Supporting youth in civic engagement such as voting and volunteering

List has been modified and adapted from the FosterClub Permanency Pact (2006).

(E) Level of Youth Connections: Indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

Circle the best response.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
While in foster care, you have connected or re-connected with relatives or caring adults who will be lifelong supportive connections	0	1	2	3	4
An adult has made a commitment to provide a permanent, parent-like relationship to you	0	1	2	3	4
You are living with an adult who has or plans to adopt you or become your legal guardian	0	1	2	3	4
You feel very disconnected from any caring adults	0	1	2	3	4

Office Use Only: Youth Name _____ Youth Date of Birth _____

Worker Completing Form _____ Date of Completion of Form _____

Form Completed: Within 30 Days of Placement ☐ Within 30 Days of Discharge ☐ Other ☐

Form Completed Without Youth at Discharge: Yes ☐ No ☐ If Yes, Explain: _____

Youth Connections Scale Utilization and Scoring

The full report on the Youth Connections Scale (YCS) pilot study along with an implementation guide and scoring instructions for agencies interested in using the YCS are available on the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare website at: http://z.umn.edu/YCS   For further questions about the development and research of the YCS or for information about utilization and scoring of the YCS, please contact the CASCW.

CASCW facilitates and conducts research and evaluation to provide empirical information about issues confronting the child welfare system, including local and statewide evaluation studies as well as research and evaluation with national relevance to the child welfare system. As home to the Minn-LInK Project, CASCW also offers the opportunity for researchers to access state administrative data from multiple agencies to answer questions about the impacts of policies, programs, and practice on the well-being of children in Minnesota.

20 YEARS
Center for Advanced Studies
in Child Welfare

University of Minnesota School of Social Work

http://z.umn.edu/YCS

cascw@umn.edu

612-624-4231

Implementation Consultation and Training

Anu Family Services was a collaborative partner in the development of the Youth Connections Scale (YCS) and, therefore, uniquely equipped with expertise to provide consultation, training, and technical assistance on the implementation of the YCS. Consultation and training can be tailored to each individual organization's or agency's needs and may include: use of the YCS as a tool for social workers, case managers, supervisors, researchers; use for youth engagement; outcomes measurement; organizational advancement; or creating a permanence-driven organization. Anu Family Services can assist organizations in reaching their goals of assisting youth to achieve higher levels of relational permanence with the YCS and other evidence informed techniques.

Anu
family services

For more information on Anu Family Services and their consultation and training:

www.anufs.org/youthconnectionsscale.asp

info@anufs.org

877-287-2441

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