

When a Teen Says "NO" to Permanence, What he may be really saying is:

"Adoption is for babies, I am not a baby"

"I am ready for independence -- I don't need more adults telling me what to do"

"I need to protect myself from being hurt again"

"I don't want to change my name"

"I don't want to lose my connections with my birth family, foster families, etc."

"I'm scared to death"

"No one will want me"

"I am too destructive for a family"

"I don't want to betray my birth family"

"Mom said she would come back"

"I'll just mess up again"

When adults give teens the power to say "NO" to permanent family connections, what the teen hears is:

"You are not lovable"

"No one would want you anyway"

"There is no hope for your future"

"You are not important enough for me to exert myself trying to find you a family"

A teen in foster care who had dictated his case plan several times once told me, "My life is like a car on a road trip and someone put me behind the wheel. But I don't have a license and I don't know how to drive and I'm just flying out of control and pretty soon I'm going to crash. Why didn't they provide me with a driver???"

If a teen tells you "NO" to permanency, this is an excellent starting point to help the teen begin to understand what his needs and fears are and to work with you on a plan for permanence.

Teens need to be reassured (and it needs to be authentic) that they do not have to give up their past in order to get a future. Things to think about include:

- * Issues around names
- * Open adoption or other avenues to maintain birth family connections
- * Connections with foster families

Some ways to get the conversation going:

“When you are older and need advice about buying a car, or taking care of a baby in the middle of the night, or cooking, car repairs, budgeting, clothing care, career options, health who do you think you might call?”

“Where do you expect to spend holidays (i.e. Thanksgiving) when you are 25 or 30?”

“If you *were* going to be part of a family, what do you think the best part would be? What would the hardest part be?”

Who cared for you when your parents could not? Who paid attention to you, looked out for you, cared about what happened to you?

Who do you like? feel good about? enjoy being with? Admire? look up to? want to be like someday?

Who believes in you? Stands by you? Compliments or praises you? Appreciates you?

Who can you count on? Who would you call at 2 am if you were in trouble? Wanted to share good news? Bad news?

Think incrementally

You don't have to get a teen to buy into adoption or permanence all at once, but rather, work on incremental steps where you broaden the teen's vision of her own future life and how family connections might be important. Once you have begun to establish the importance *to the teen* of having lifelong connections, you can begin talking about ways to create or solidify these bonds and discuss options such as adoption or guardianship, comparing the similarities and differences.

As you try to explain permanency options to a teen, one analogy that sometimes helps is to talk about marriage where two people who are not related by blood jointly make a commitment to each other to become a family and then solidify their commitment with a legal act. In a similar way, they can be empowered to chose their lifelong family connections and then solidify those commitments with a legal bond such as adoption or guardianship.

Build Permanency conversations into other work

When you work with teens, some of your time is likely to be spent on helping prepare them for independence. As you work on particular skills such as cooking or budgeting or career planning, help the teen to see examples of how people use their own permanent family connections throughout life to assist them in developing these skills.



