



## Youth Thrive in Practice: *Social Connections with Family and Caregivers*

**October 2021**

### **What is Youth Thrive in Practice: Social Connections with Family and Caregivers?**

Considerations and questions for youth workers and systems to explore with young people and their family that focus on building and strengthening their relationship.

### **Why are Social Connections with family and caregivers important?**

Connections to family are critical in helping young people to thrive. Family connections build and strengthen young people's Protective and Promotive Factors:

- [Youth Resilience](#)
- [Social Connections](#)
- [Knowledge of Adolescent Development](#)
- [Concrete Support in Times of Need](#)
- [Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence](#)

Simultaneously, family connections have a meaningful role by providing a positive boost in a young person's development and serving as a buffer against life's adversities.

Sibling connections are especially important and special to young people, and they want and need these relationships to be maintained and nurtured. Young people look to their siblings as a source of support and as peer partners who know, understand, and share their life experiences. Maintaining sibling connections is protective factor and has been linked to positive outcomes and personal well-being.

### **Who is Being Referred to as "Family"?**

- Family of choice. This is anyone a young person considers to be a member of their family. Family members can be biologically related or not (also known as nonfictive and fictive kin).
- Caregiver. Biological, adoptive, foster/resource, and kin parent
- Grandparents
- Godparents
- Aunts and Uncles
- Cousins
- Siblings. Biological and/or foster
- Young person's own child
- Close family friends and neighbors
- Romantic partner
- Life partner



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## **Considerations and questions for youth workers when collaborating with young people to strengthen their Social Connections with family and siblings:**

- **Talk with young people about who they consider family (biological and nonbiological) and the importance of staying connected to them.**
  - Who do you call when you want to celebrate a milestone, special event, a good grade, an accomplishment, or anything big or small?
  - Who do you turn to when you need help or advice?
  - Is there a family member you lost contact with who you would like to reconnect with?
  - With a young person, create a list of persons they consider family (biologically related or not).
  - A young person may be hesitant to talk about their family members (e.g., the young person may not want the family member to know they are in foster care or the young person does not want the family member to be burdened by the system's rules and regulations). Developing a trusting relationship with the young person is a critical first step in encouraging sharing of information.
- **Ask young people how they would like to stay connected to their family and siblings, and then act on them.**
  - Are you having any difficulty meeting with a family member due to distance, lack of transportation, and/or social distancing?
  - If possible or appropriate, how do you see your family or sibling helping with this challenge?
  - How is the young person being encouraged to ask family or sibling for help?
- Young people often communicate through action, not words, that is interpreted as misbehavior.  
**Never penalize young people for adolescent behaviors by cancelling visits with family members and siblings.**
  - Talk with a young person about actions and consequences, help them to understand the results of their actions, and brainstorm with them on a clear set of actions that address the negative behavior (e.g., cannot participate in a school trip or event or have to do extra chores). It is best if the actions can be tied to the behavior.
  - Engage the young person and family member(s) in the conversation about actions and consequences. As a team, decide on the best approach for responding to the young person's negative behavior.

## **Considerations and questions for youth workers when collaborating with family to strengthen their Social Connections with young people:**

### ***Partnering with Family***

- **Family members need to understand their important role in the young person's life.**
  - How is information about adolescent development, the impact of trauma, the important role of relationships, and the Protective and Promotive Factors being shared and discussed with family members?
  - What gradual steps are family members encouraged to take in building trust and strengthening their relationship with the young person?

- Is the family member willing to commit to regular interactions with the young person (e.g., calls and text messages, weekly dinner with the young person, cheer for the young person at sports events)?
- How is healing between the young person and their family being supported?
- How might we work to understand and address any feelings of shame that they may have?
- **Identify and connect young people and family members to activities that develop and strengthen their relationship.**
  - How are the activities that young people and their families are interested in identified and nurtured? For example, if they are athletic, encourage them to run a 5K together or have a sports night. If they like to read, encourage them to start a book club (for only themselves or invite other young people and their family members to join).
  - What activities are available at your agency or organization for caregivers and young people to participate in together? How are these being advertised to caregivers and young people?
  - How do young people and their family learn about community activities and events that they can participate in (e.g., are they provided with a community resource list, websites and social media that promote community events)?
  - How do family members and young people take time and make space to get to know each other better and bond (e.g., have dinner together, go for a walk together, have coffee together)? How can the agency help remove any barriers to do so?
- **Encourage family members to help young people reach for their aspirations, set goals, and be future thinking.**
  - How has the family encouraged the young person to establish goals and an action plan for achieving them? Is the family highlighting the small and big steps toward reaching these goals?
  - Are there extracurricular activities, internships, or job opportunities that align with the young person's aspirations or goals that a family member can help connect the young person to?
  - What are some activities that the family member and young person can participate in so that they can learn about different careers and opportunities?
  - How are the young person and family member being helped to participate in any college tours or obtain any information about vocational schools?
  - How are the family and young person learning about the schedule for any standardized or specialized tests for continuing education? What access do they have to any test preparation resources and how are these being pursued? How are they informed about important application and/or registration information, such as due dates, deadlines and requirements, and how to apply for financial aid?

### ***Partnering with Caregivers (biological, adoptive, foster/resource, and kin parents)***

- When adults talk about young people, words matter. **Assess, and if necessary, develop a strategy to change the mindset of how a caregiver thinks and talks about a young person** (e.g., troublemaker vs. normal adolescent boundary testing).
  - How is the caregiver being helped to make the connection between a young person's actions with

what the caregiver has learned about the Protective and Promotive Factors, adolescent brain development, the impact of trauma and toxic stress, and healing centered engagement?

- How does the caregiver show that they value the young person? If this is hard for the caregiver, help them identify 2-3 strengths and coach them on how to discuss these strengths with the young person. If the caregiver consistently speaks negatively about the young person (e.g., the young person is a troublemaker), brainstorm about activities the caregiver and young person can do together to highlight the young person's strengths.
- What resources and supports are available for the caregiver to help them with any challenges or concerns (e.g., worried the young person may be depressed, isolated, bullied; abusing drugs or alcohol; having unsafe sex)?

- **Provide opportunities for young people to learn and grow.**

- How are caregivers being helped to encourage young people to participate in activities and try new things?
- What information is being shared with the caregiver about community activities and events that the young person could participate in or attend?
- How are caregivers helped to understand their role in supporting typical life experiences for young people (e.g., helping a young person to find a part-time job, participate in extracurricular activities, learn to cook, manage a budget, saving to buy a car or rent an apartment)?
- How is the caregiver being helped to overcome any challenges in supporting a young person to explore and learn?

- **Help family members to identify and support opportunities for young people to practice independence.**

- What are some opportunities currently available for young people to practice their independence and what would the caregiver and young person want to work toward together? For example, is the young person ready to travel to school alone or with peers? Is the young person ready for a part-time job? Is the young person provided with an allowance and coached on how to manage their money? If a caregiver says no to these (or other opportunities to practice independence), how can the caregiver and young person work together to help the young person develop these skills?
- What concerns does the caregiver have about the young person practicing their independence? What supports and/or resources are needed to help address these barriers?

- **Help caregivers to be a coach to young people and a “giver of power.”**

- How do caregivers give young people the opportunity to make decisions (e.g., can the young person select the activities they want to participate in, the school they want to attend, how often they want to see and call family members)?
- Do caregivers actively seek out a young person's thoughts and opinions and use that information to make decisions?
- What concerns does the caregiver have about sharing power with young people? What supports and/or resources are needed to help address these barriers?



- **Encourage caregivers to create opportunities for young people to try and learn from teachable moments.**
  - In what ways is the caregiver highlighting positive moments in the young person's life (e.g., choosing between their top choice schools or determining which art project to submit) and how can these moments be applied to other decision-making opportunities?
  - If a young person was not successful in obtaining something they wanted (e.g., tried out for a sport and did not make the team or applied for a scholarship but did not receive it), how is the caregiver working with the young person to reflect on this moment and to identify opportunities to improve or try again?
- Encourage caregivers to **acknowledge when life is hard, be present in the moment, and provide a safe, affirming, welcoming, and empathetic space for young people to share their feelings, thoughts, and challenges.**
  - What does active listening mean to a caregiver and what opportunities do they have to appropriately respond to a young person's "big feelings"?
  - What does a safe, affirming, welcoming, and empathetic space to share feelings mean to a caregiver? How is the caregiver creating this for the young person?
  - Do caregivers have an opportunity to practice their response to something a young person says that they do not agree with or understand? Is there any coaching for the caregiver that may be appropriate?
  - How are caregivers prepared to talk about the impact of racism and other discrimination against the young person and their peers?
  - How are caregivers being helped to understand the intersectionality of identities (e.g., race, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, disability) and to discuss this with young people?
- **Recognize that caregivers have hard times too.**
  - How are caregivers being helped to become aware of their own boundaries when a young person's actions or experiences may be triggering for them? How are they being helped to be aware of when they need help and how to access this help? This awareness is critical for the caregiver's well-being, and models to young people the Protective and Promotive Factors.
  - How are caregivers reacting to normal adolescent boundary testing?
  - How are caregivers being supported in setting expectations and rules?
  - In what ways is the caregiver aware of the impact of their own trauma histories and how they may manifest it in their role as caregiver?
  - What resources are available for caregivers to assist with any challenges and help them to process and/or address their own emotions?
  - Do caregivers have access to their own social support and respite help?



## **Considerations and questions for systems to strengthen Social Connections between young people and their family:**

- **Prioritize the relationship between young people and their family.**
  - What policies help young people and their families to connect, bond, and heal?
  - What policies impede building and sustaining relationships between young people and their families (e.g., do not call list, disciplining young people by cancelling family visits)? What needs to be done to change these?
  - How are family members being sought out and engaged for the various roles and needs of a young person (e.g., do not focus only on family members who can provide legal permanency; seek out family members to help with school, teach, and maintain cultural traditions, and share family history)?
  - How are young people's and families' expertise and feedback used to develop approaches that facilitate building and sustaining relationships between young people and their family members?
- Family members, including siblings, and caregivers are encouraged to **understand adolescent brain development, the impact of trauma and toxic stress on young people, positive youth development, healing centered engagement, and the Protective and Promotive Factors.**
  - Are the Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors included in your caregiver training or support to birth parents?
  - How much training time is devoted to the adolescent brain, the impact of trauma and toxic stress, and healing centered engagement?
  - Besides training, how else are family members and caregivers informed about the Protective and Promotive Factors, adolescent brain development, impact of trauma and toxic stress, and the importance of healing centered engagement? For example, are these discussed during visits between a youth worker and the family, caregiver support groups, community cafes, or family events?
  - How are young people a part of these conversations and learning opportunities?
- **Encourage a supportive and brave environment that allows for young people and their family to have crucial conversations, heal, and bond.**
  - What resources are available to young people and their family members to (re)establish the relationship and build trust (e.g., family and/or peer coaches, connections to faith-based or spiritual leaders, healing circles)? How are young people and their families learning about and accessing them?
  - How are youth workers and other staff members coached to have hard conversations and to facilitate difficult decision-making with young people and their families?
  - How are young people and their families co-designing and maintaining a supportive and brave space that encourages bonding and healing with the agency/organization?

- **Provide resources to support activities between young people and their family.**
  - Where can youth workers and staff, young people, and their families access a list of community-based activities, events, organizations, and memberships (e.g., gym, sports-related)?
  - How are youth workers and staff, young people, and their families provided with up-to-date information about activities and events that support young people and their family to bond (e.g., family event coordinator, office bulletin board, agency newsletter)? What funding is available to support relationship building activities between young people and their family? How do staff, young people, and their family access it?

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