

# STRENGTHENING RELATIONAL PERMANENCY FOR YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE THROUGH MENTORSHIP

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth in foster care often lack consistent, supportive adult relationships critical to long-term stability and success. While federal child welfare policy prioritizes legal permanency outcomes such as reunification, adoption, and guardianship, it does not adequately support relational permanency, defined as enduring, trusted connections with caring adults. Research shows that mentorship improves placement stability, mental health, and long-term outcomes for youth in foster care (Administration for Children and Families, 2019; Taussig et al., 2012; Poon et al., 2021). However, access to mentorship remains inconsistent because of the absence of dedicated federal funding and national standards. To address this gap, Congress should pass the Foster Youth Mentoring Act of 2025, expand federal research and implementation guidance for trauma-informed mentoring programs, and make mentorship part of permanency planning for youth ages 12 and older. Strengthening relational permanency will improve outcomes for youth and reduce long-term public costs associated with placement instability, incarceration, and declining mental health.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

This issue is deeply personal to me because of my lived experience in the foster care system. Growing up, I experienced multiple placements and changing caregivers, yet what was missing most was not stability in housing, but stability in relationships. Over time, the instability and trauma I experienced both before and during foster care left me feeling hopeless. I stopped believing in my future, gave up on many of my dreams, and struggled to trust people because so many relationships in my life had been temporary. I witnessed firsthand how the system prioritizes placement outcomes over long-term connections. Case plans focused primarily on where I would live rather than who would consistently support me. When placements changed, the few relationships I had often ended as well, reinforcing the belief that support was temporary and that I had to navigate challenges alone.

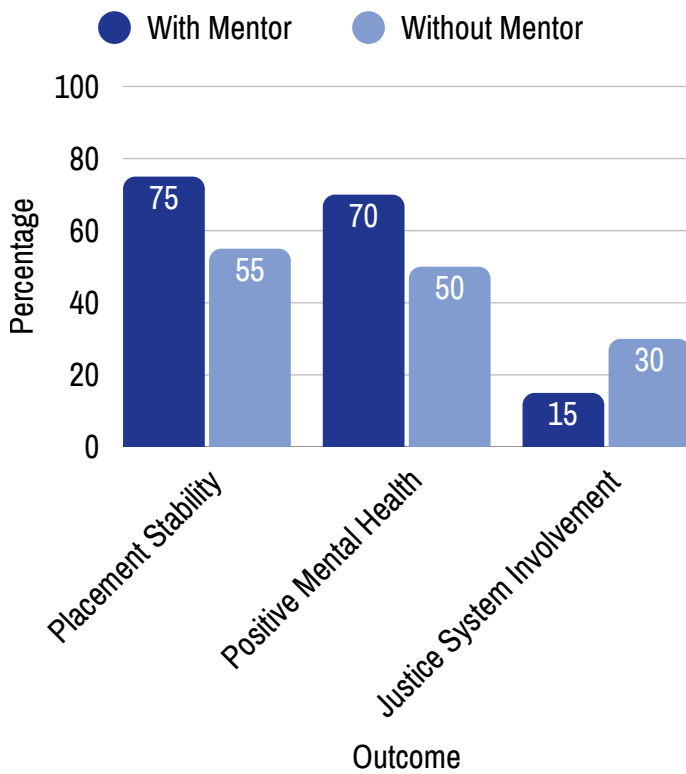
My perspective began to change when I met my mentor. For the first time, I had someone who consistently believed in me, even when I did not believe in myself. Their guidance and support helped me reconnect with my

**PERSONAL REFLECTION (CONTINUED)**

goals, rebuild trust, and believe that my future could be different. Because of that mentorship, I was able to obtain my dream job, gain admission to my dream law school, and secure the internship that allows me to present this policy brief to Congress today. Through both my own experiences and those of my peers, I have seen how differently outcomes can unfold when a young person has even one supportive adult who remains involved in their life. Youth with mentors are often more confident, emotionally stable, and better able to navigate challenges. In contrast, many youth without those relationships struggle not because they lack potential, but because they lack consistent support.

This is why mentorship matters. It addresses a gap the current system often overlooks. By strengthening policies that support relational permanency, policymakers can help ensure that youth are not only placed in homes but also connected to caring adults who remain in their lives long term.

**Mentorship Improves Outcomes for Youth in Foster Care**



**THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW**

Youth in foster care frequently experience instability, trauma, and disrupted relationships with caregivers and supportive adults. While federal policy emphasizes legal permanency, it often overlooks relational permanency: consistent, supportive relationships that help youth build trust, resilience, and long-term stability. These challenges often intensify during adolescence, when youth begin preparing for adulthood and permanency planning becomes increasingly important. Older youth in foster care are more likely to experience frequent placement transitions, emotional isolation, and poor transition outcomes. Research shows that older adolescents in foster care experience frequent placement disruptions, making stable adult relationships especially critical during this stage (Nesmith, 2024). Supportive adult connections can improve stability and help youth develop the trust and skills needed for adulthood.

## THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (CONTINUED)

Research consistently demonstrates that having at least one stable adult connection improves outcomes for youth in foster care. Youth with supportive relationships experience greater placement stability and stronger transitions into adulthood (Administration for Children and Families, 2019). A randomized controlled trial of the Fostering Healthy Futures program found that mentored youth experienced fewer placement disruptions and improved permanency outcomes compared to their peers (Taussig et al., 2012). Additionally, a meta-analysis found that mentoring is associated with improvements in mental health, social relationships, and behavioral outcomes (Poon et al., 2021), while other research links mentoring to reduced involvement in the criminal justice system (Blakeslee & Keller, 2018). Although mentoring is not commonly framed as prevention, it can help prevent many of the behavioral and emotional challenges associated with placement instability and trauma.

Despite this evidence, federal child welfare policy does not consistently prioritize mentorship or relational permanency. Title IV-E of the Social Security Act primarily funds foster care maintenance, administration, and training, but does not explicitly support mentorship services. The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA or “Family First”) expanded funding for prevention services, yet mentoring is still not widely implemented as an evidence-informed practice across states. Similarly, the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (“Chafee”) provides independent living services for older youth, but mentorship remains optional and inconsistent depending on state resources and nonprofit capacity.

As a result, access to mentorship often depends on geography, local funding, and nonprofit capacity rather than a national standard. This gap has contributed to growing federal attention on mentoring supports in foster care, including legislative efforts such as the Foster Youth Mentoring Act of 2025, while systemic barriers continue to drive poor long-term outcomes. Approximately 20% of youth who age out of foster care experience homelessness, and a similar percentage become involved in the criminal justice system within two years (Silver Lining Mentoring, 2023). These outcomes reflect a misalignment between current policy priorities and what youth need most: consistent, supportive relationships.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to strengthen relational permanency, Congress should:

- **Pass the Foster Youth Mentoring Act of 2025 (H.R. 4769) to expand federal support for mentoring programs for youth in foster care and strengthen access to supportive adult relationships.**

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS (CONTINUED)**

- **Direct the Administration for Children and Families to expand research and implementation guidance for trauma-informed mentoring programs under FFPSA**, including mentor screening, training, supervision, and strategies to address mentor shortages through phased implementation, community partnerships, and peer or group mentoring models.
- **Require that youth ages 12 and older be connected with a mentor as part of their case plan and permanency process** to ensure consistent access to supportive adult relationships regardless of geography.