Schools' Role in Permanency by Gail Johnson Vaughan

Love and Belonging – Permanency for a Lifetime

Permanency for a lifetime is an adult who consistently states and demonstrates that s/he has entered an loving, unconditional, life-long parent-like relationship with the youth. The youth agrees that the adult will play this role in his/her life.

What Role can the School Play?

Understanding the youth within the context of their experience of foster care and its related instability is very important. For instance youth who seem distracted, not fully comprehending what is going on around them are often misinterpreted as lazy, disinterested, having low capacity, rebellion or disability, instead of the fact that they have learned to focus attention on their survival and lack of resolution about their past. By definition they have traumatic histories. In most cases they have had to move from family to family, often disrupting their educational process. Their sense of belonging is almost always impaired. Most have given up hope of every being accepted for who they are. Many have lost sight of their strengths and have developed behaviors to compensate for their low self-esteem. Arriving at yet another school can make that sense of hopelessness worse or it reverse it and begin the upward spiral to educational, emotional and relationship success.

1) **Demonstrate Healthy Adult/Youth Relationships**. School personnel are well positioned to demonstrate the components of healthy and meaningful relationships and that adults can be trusted. This starts with being open and curious to the youth's story. What story does the problematic behavior tell? Does the youth feel alone? Has the youth given up? What educational breaks have they experienced? What support do they need to succeed?

Darla Henry's seven critical skill elements for preparing a child for permanence apply to all adults who interact with the youth, school personnel included: * engage the child, * listen to the child's words, * speak the truth, * validate the child's life story, * create a safe space, * go back in time, * recognize pain as part of the process

2) **Challenge Your Own Beliefs About Youth Permanency**. Many adults find it hard to believe that there are adults who will step forward to commit to a lifelong parent-like relationship with youth in foster care. Where do you fall on that? If you don't believe it is possible you are not likely to help make it happen. Invite local youth permanence experts, including youth, to do in-service training for you and your staff.

3) **Include the Caregiver**. Reaching out to caregivers of foster youth demonstrates that you recognize them as valuable assets to your students and appreciate the role they can play in helping the youth succeed. They are parenting these youth. Consider how you might feel if the school conducted significant meetings about your child's conduct or future without you. Involving them also strengthens the relationship between the caregiver and youth, enhancing the possibility of it becoming a lifelong parent-like connection. Care should be taken not to push for commitment, but to soundly support the relationship.

4) **Recognize The Value Of Family/Extended Family Connections** and how they connect the youth to their history, stories of family success, emotional identity. Help them understand that being connected for a lifetime, even if not living with them has value.

5) **Document Youths' Successes**. Oftentimes a youth in foster care has a written record of failure. Consider creating vehicles for documenting the youths' strengths. These could include positive incidents, attributes or individual achievements. Make sure that these are communicated to the youth, the caregiver and the youth's social worker and that they become part of the youth's permanent file.

6) **Become Part of the Youth's Permanency Team**. Learn about your county's youth permanency practice. Visit http://www.cpyp.org/ to learn about Best Practices in this area and encourage your county to adopt them. Let the youth's social worker know that you want to support his/her efforts to achieve a permanent family for the youth.