

Mama S & Papa M

Making APPLAs Work for Youth

MY husband, Michael, called me at work. “How was it?” I asked. “Awful,” he replied, “she seemed on the verge of a nervous breakdown.” He was referring to Merli, who had gone to court on her 21st birthday to plead unsuccessfully with the judge to extend her time in foster care or help in some way. She then went to empty her subsidized independent living program apartment and arrived at our house to store her things in our basement. She would spend the next five months living with her boyfriend and his extended family and when things got too tense there, at our house for several weeks.

I met Merli while I was doing an internship as a graduate student. After the internship, I lost contact with her. But five years later, I saw a story she wrote in *Represent* and sent a note to her at the magazine. She was 18 and in foster care. We had lunch every now and then. A few months before her 21st birthday, she began calling me more, sounding increasingly anxious. She had no place to go after she aged out of care. Although I had already been a foster parent and had experience with the system, I really couldn't believe that this could happen. I asked all the obvious questions: Isn't your caseworker helping you? Have you looked for apartments yourself? Do you have a friend you could live with? Eventually, I began searching myself — no easy task in New York City. A colleague finally helped with a referral to a subsidized program with studio apartments for youth

who are aging out of care. It took months to organize but that is where Merli ended up — with Michael and I and Merli's boyfriend moving her in.

Although I was saddened by Merli's mother's early death from sickle cell anemia, I was also intrigued by Merli, her quiet determination and her parents' brave immigration from Haiti. I believe that she came to rely on Michael and I because we were the only people who told her she wasn't going to live on the streets, and were actually willing to take the time to do something about it. I would burn with anger over the coming years when we would see agency staff or the guardian ad litem and they would make grandiose comments about Merli's future, while none of them had secured for her someone who could meet her basic need for emotional security.

Ours is a relatively recent story and it is a good illustration of why the federal government no longer allows independent living as a permanency goal. When a child is removed from his or her family and comes into foster care and it isn't safe to return home, it is the legal and moral obligation of the caseworker, as a government agent, to make sure that the child leaves care connected to a responsible adult. Federal law — the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 — has set a list of options to be considered and pursued in order of most to least secure: adoption; legal guardianship;

placement with a fit and willing relative; or Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement.

APPLA can only be used if there are compelling reasons that termination of parental rights and the three preferred options are not being pursued. Three compelling reasons, according to the 2005 “Child Welfare for the 21st Century: A Handbook of Practices, Policies and Programs,” are listed in the regulations: (1) an older teen who specifically requests that emancipation be established as his or her permanency plan [note: this is contradictory as emancipation is not a plan for permanency. The intention, however, seems to be that an older teen has specified that he or she does not want to be placed with a family for adoption or guardianship and doesn't have a relative able to care for him or her.]; (2) a parent and youth who have a significant bond but the parent is unable to care for the youth because of an emotional or physical disability and the youth's foster parents have committed to raising the youth to the age of majority and to facilitate visitation with the disabled parent; or (3) an American Indian tribe has identified another planned permanent living arrangement for youth.

To summarize, APPLA can and should be used if the three preferred alternatives are not an option, whether or not parental rights have been terminated. And this is true even if a youth is living in an institutional setting



— as long as a caring, committed adult is involved in planning for and with the youth.

Before this legislation and since, outside the child welfare system, adults support youth in care or who are leaving care. In addition to it now being mandatory to have, at a minimum, a caring, committed adult for each child, best practice also dictates inviting the adults from the shadows to the table so that relationships between the adults and youth are strengthened.

It is also important to improve communication between the youth, the caring, committed adult and the agency. For example, Michael and I could have been more active earlier in supporting Merli and spared her much emotional distress if we had known how large the gaps were in her care. And five years later, as we support Merli in adopting her 17-year-old sister, the agency continues to work around us rather than invite us to the table. Child welfare and legal professionals need to embrace all the options available to connect youth to adults for life in a concurrent approach.

How can child welfare professionals support this form of permanency for youth?

- Explore all options upfront for all youth. ASEFA permits and commonsense dictates having a concurrent or back up plan if a child can't return home. Sit with youth,



Former foster youth Merli celebrates her college graduation from SUNY Purchase. Above, Merli shares the special day with her younger sister, Marie, and Michael and Sarah Gerstenzang, who have stepped up to help Merli after she emancipated from foster care.

	Definition	Legal Custody	Physical Custody	Duties Foster	Duration	Stipend
Foster Parent	Temporary Caretaker	No	Yes	All care of child and bi-weekly visit with birth family	From a few days to a few years	Yes
Guardian	Caretaker but no TPR	Yes	Yes	All care	Until Child is 18/21	Varies
Mentor	Provide guidance for child	No	No	Take child to cultural & educational activities	Varies	No
Adoptive Parent	Permanent caretaker for child (as if biological)	yes	Yes	All care	Life	Varies
APPLA	Provide guidance and	No	No, but may live w/ you	Make sure child has emotional, physical & financial security	Life	No

Speak with parents and foster parents and review the case file to come up with a list of possible adults who can provide support to the youth. Have the youth prioritize the list and contact the adults in the order requested. Invite the adults to a meeting to discuss permanency options. If compelling reasons listed above are met or no adult steps forward for preferred permanency options, pursue APPLA. The law requires re-evaluating the appropriateness of the APPLA goal at each permanency hearing — essentially to ask, is this the best we can do for this child?

- Discuss how the proposed arrangement will be more stable and secure than ordinary foster care, according to “Making It Permanent: Reasonable Efforts to Finalize Permanency Plans for Foster Children.” Write an agreement between the caring, committed adult, the agency and the youth so that roles are clear.
- Once caring, committed adults are identified, they should be depended upon by the child welfare and legal professionals. Much too often, caseworkers and legal guardians play the temporary parent role — and abandon the youth when they leave their jobs or the youth leave care. Unless these professionals are stepping up to be the caring, committed adult, they should focus on their legal and moral responsibility:

getting kids out of foster care, not buying birthday gifts, or other impermanent items. And when youth come to them with problems, they should ask them, “What does your caring, committed adult think?” All opportunities should be taken to secure the relationship.

- Invite caring, committed adults to all planning meetings for the youth — so they will know what services youth are receiving and what is missing. Adults who are part of the team are going to be much more committed — otherwise they might assume someone else is taking care of a need — and the recognition will help reinforce their commitment. In addition, in a review of the effectiveness of classes that teach independent living skills such as money management, the authors of “The Central Role of Permanence in Improving Outcomes for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care” note that research suggests that youth are more likely to learn skills when they also have enduring, supportive relationships.
- Plan for the youth’s exit from care. A good APPLA plan will minimize stress for the youth.

What do caring, committed adults need to know about fulfilling an APPLA?

- Commitment is everything. Adults have to

prove their commitment to youth. These kids have been disappointed and adults have to tell them in words and deeds that you are there to stay. This doesn’t mean you can re-parent a youth who is 17 or 20 years old. And it doesn’t mean that you have to spend every waking moment together. It means that for each child, you have to evaluate where he or she is currently in relation to the skills that he or she will need to be independent and help him or her move toward being happy and productive. In his book, “Parenting Adopted Adolescents,” Greg Keck gives excellent advice to focus on the emotional connection with the youth first and school achievement later. Nurturing through providing food and doing laundry for youth can be helpful in developing an emotional connection. In short, the goal is to train the youth to trust and accept help from the caring, committed adult.

- Guidelines for what is expected of them. Youth need an invitation to celebrate the holidays and their birthday; advice; help with school; support and guidance in seeking a job and a place to live. If an adult is not in a position to provide financial support for education or training, they can use their time to track resources to enable the child to obtain the highest degree of education or training that the child is capable of receiving. Most youth who have spent time in care are educationally

disadvantaged and need time and support to catch up.

- A significant level of support will be necessary until a youth reaches about the age of 26 — the age that many researchers feel that represents emotional and intellectual independence. The level of support, of course, depends on the youth's circumstances. In our situation, Merli eventually connected us to her brother and sister so supporting them became part of our role. Youth will determine the relationship depending on their needs — academic, emotional and physical — and the other supports that already exist in their worlds.
- APPLA is a compromise — adoption is not only more secure for kids but for adults as well. A caring, committed adult should consider how they might feel if someone else steps forward to adopt and they are left as second best. In many ways, the relationship of the caring, committed adult is similar to that of a stepparent coming into a family with older youth.

• Attachments take time on both ends. Older youth come with histories and relationships as do caring, committed adults. It takes time — years — to blend these relationships and adults shouldn't expect to replace prior relationships.

Merli's reaction to the above: "I was used to handling a lot on my own but if I had an APPLA goal, I would have known who my 'go to' person would be. I injured my ankle once — it was after 5 p.m. and I had no one to call at the agency. And now, almost five years out of care, I have almost no contact with any of the casework or legal staff. I welcome the guidance and advice I get because I feel like I need an advocate. When things used to get overwhelming, I would just stop going to school but once I felt supported, I could weather the stress and excel.

Where they are now: Merli graduated in May 2009 with a four-year degree from SUNY Purchase, is self-supporting and in the process of adopting Marie. Merli's brother, Yves, went from sleeping on the floor at his friend's house, working for a year with a tutor

to pass his GED to Tallahassee Community College where he attends school and works. His goal is to join the police or the military after he finishes his degree. Marie spends two nights a week with us and five nights with her sister. She is a junior in high school. It has been a joy to see these three improve their relationships with each other and become happier, more confident people. ❁

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(kids in waiting)



Justin, 13, is a friendly, outgoing, helpful guy who likes to entertain and is funny. Playing games is a favorite pastime, but watch out for his tricky moves in checkers, he'll win every time. Star Wars video games and action games are always fun, and he enjoys expressing his creative side through drawing. Swimming is great for exercise or just having some fun. Catfish, Dr. Pepper and CiCi's pizza are three foods of choice to keep up this guy's energy.

In sixth grade, Justin benefits from speech therapy, as well as counseling, which will need to continue following placement. He thrives on consistency and routine, and wants a forever family who will help him excel at life. Justin has siblings with whom he hopes to remain in contact. His caseworker prefers a family who is willing to participate in a transitional plan prior to placement; however, all family types will be considered. Financial assistance may be available for adoption-related services.

For Oklahoma children, both homestudied and non-homestudied Oklahoma families are encouraged to inquire; only homestudied families from other states should do so. For more information, contact The Adoption Exchange at (800) 451-5246. ID 8596