

You Gotta Believe!
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by Pat O'Brien
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**When you take the P.A.R.E.N.T. out of PERMANENT
You are Left with M.(ostly) N.(ot) E.(nough)**

There is lots of talk going around the country these days about Teen Permanency and about how urgent it is to get teens “permanency” before they age out of care. And of course we would jump on that bandwagon if only they were talking about getting the teens the parents they so desperately need before their discharge from foster care. However, a lot of things being sold as teen permanency have absolutely nothing to do with recruiting a forever lifetime parent who will be both unilaterally and unconditionally committed to them in the way that the other 98% of Americans whose childhoods did not touch the United States foster care system had. Each and every one of us whose childhood did not touch foster care can trace back our success as a person to our origins as members of a family; a membership that continues today no matter how old we are.

Here are the bill-of-goods that are being sold as “permanency” for teens:

- 1) Mentors – an older person who can teach the younger mentee some skills.
- 2) Volunteers - like Big Brothers or Big Sisters
- 3) Connections or Significant Connections – often members of birth family
- 4) Resources or Permanent Resources

Now, are any of the above a bad thing? No. They are just not permanent. Only parents are permanent. And it is interesting if you take the six letters that make up the

word P.A.R.E.N.T. and you scratch them out of the nine letter word *perMANEnt* you are left with these three letters: M.N.E. Which we say stands for **M**ostly **N**ot **E**nough. It's not bad; it's just not enough. It does not meet a young adult's greatest need who faces aging out of foster care to no one but his or herself. And that greatest need is the need for a parent who will make that young adult a permanent member of a family.

When you talk about substituting mentors, volunteers, connections, and resources in place of parents you are really misunderstanding from where permanency flows. Permanency flows from a parent who makes a unilateral decision to stay unconditionally committed to their child for a lifetime. Now the 98% of us whose childhoods never touched the foster care system never fully appreciated what our parents have done for us. They gave us the foundation from which we sprang into our future.

You see mentors, volunteers, connections, and resources can be very important pieces of the village that can help our own *You Gotta Believe* parents raise the teens and young adults we place with them. For instance, at *You Gotta Believe* 70% of the parents who make a lifetime commitment to teens in foster care are single parents. 85% of those single parents are single women. However, whether one is a single mom, single dad, or a couple raising a teen, all our parents can benefit from having the village to help raise their child. However, there is no village without the parent.

Yes when I grew up it was difficult for me to cause trouble in my neighborhood because Mrs. Houser on the corner would see me doing something wrong and she would, at first, come down and correct me. But she made it perfectly clear; if she ever saw me doing the same thing again she would waltz right down to my house and speak to my mother. I changed my behavior immediately because I dared not have my mother find

out about my misbehavior. Mrs. Houser was part of the village that was raising me --- the child. However, there would have been no village for me --- the child --- had I not had a parent known to all in that village.

So mentors, volunteers, connections, and resources may not have anything to do with providing the permanency our teens so desperately need, they can be an instrumental part of the village that supports the parents we recruit for our teens once the teen has the foundation of the family with at least one parent. The most meaningful role for mentors, volunteers, connections, and resources is **after** a placement is made.

The other way mentors, volunteers, connections, and resources can play a crucial role for the teen or young adult foster youth who has no parent identified is when we deputize them to help us recruit that forever permanent parent who will either legally or morally adopt the youth. Their involvement in the young adult's life can be instrumental in identifying a lifetime parent for that youth. Do mentors, volunteers, connections, and resources have cousins, parents, employers, churches, friends, and other family members? Of course they do. We need to educate these folks about the greatest need their young mentee/client/relative/connection has. And that greatest need is to have a permanent lifetime family and parent recruited for them **before** they age out of foster care. Once mentors, volunteers, connections, and resources understand the urgency of permanency, they can then explore all the options for the youth from the constructive adults who are already in their own lives.

One final point. Half the homeless population is made up of people who were previously in foster care. Half. Picture a youth discharged from foster care to no one but him or herself. No place to live. Not earning enough money to afford rent. Having no

place to do their own laundry or to even take a comfortable shower or bath. Picture that young adult stepping outside the foster care door and walking right into quick sand. Now the young person is slowly sinking in the quick sand and his mentor, volunteer, connection, or resource comes up to him, looking down as he is sinking, not really noticing the sinking because it is happening so slowly, and they will ask him how he is doing. He is so overwhelmed with his life problems he does not know what else to say so he says “fine.” “Everything is fine.” When one is not a parent one does not explore further. They simply accept “fine.”

What a parent does is come up from the bottom of the quick sand so that they can stop the sinking. Parents understand young adults today cannot make it without the support of a family. They create a safety net environment and give that young adult the time that he or she needs to get it together. No one anywhere between the ages of 18 and 21 can make it on their own these days in this economy. And this has been true for the past two-and-a-half to three decades. Parents have always known that. Very few can even finish college in four years these days. Parents understand that. Even when one graduates from college and gets a full time job, most of these young people do not leave “the safety net” because they can’t pay off their loans and support themselves on the income they are bringing in. Parents accept that. Parents stop the sinking by giving their children the time they need to make it in this economy and offer the emotional support that every young person needs to make it through life.

So when someone tries to sell you a bill of goods by sharing with you that there are a variety of “permanency options” for teens and young adults aging out of foster care, please feel free to share with them that there is only one option. And that option is

family. Second best strategies may be good programs, may help some kids when they are discharged to no one but themselves, but second best strategies do not meet our youth's greatest need. And that is the need to belong in a family with at least one parent. Just like the other 98% of us whose childhoods did not touch the foster care system.

*To learn more about the need for permanent parents for teens and young adults in foster care you can listen to our live radio call-in show “**The Adopting Teens & Tweens Radio Forum**” every Sunday evening from 8-9pm (Eastern Time) by logging on to www.am1240wgbb.com. If you happen to miss the live broadcast you can listen to past radio programs by clicking here: <http://www.am1240wgbb.com/Show%20Pages/TeensAndTweens/teens.htm>*

*You can also watch a live-stream of our weekly cable access television show entitled “**The Adopting Teens & Tweens Show**” every Thursday at 12 noon and 8pm (Eastern Time) by logging on to www.bricartsmedia.org/community-media/bcat-tv-network and then scroll down and click on the word “launch” under the words “BCAT 2.”*

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