



THE HIDDEN REALITIES OF POST-ADOPTION ESTRANGEMENT: Why Post-Permanency Support Must Prioritize Relationships

Adoption and guardianship are often celebrated as a joyful conclusion to a child's journey through the child welfare system. But neither adoption nor guardianship is the finish line—it is the beginning of a lifelong relationship.



While legal permanency marks a significant milestone, it does not ensure emotional or relational permanency (Rolock et al., 2026). Emotional permanency reflects a young person's sense of belonging and connection, and relational permanency reflects the enduring parent-child relationships that sustain that sense of belonging over time. While most adopted youth report strong relational permanency, and enduring connections with their adoptive families, research suggests that a meaningful minority of these youth do not experience the same enduring sense of connection and belonging (Vandivere et al., 2021).¹

One of the most overlooked challenges in adoption is post-adoption estrangement, a form of relational permanency discontinuity in which youth who have been adopted or placed in guardianship become emotionally or physically disconnected from their adoptive or guardianship families despite the legal adoption remaining intact. This may occur before or after they transition to adulthood, often without formal acknowledgment or support. Estrangement should not be viewed solely as the absence of contact. Research suggests estrangement within adoptive families is often more complex than simply cutting off communication and may involve varying degrees of emotional distance, conflict, and unresolved attachment (Baden et al., 2025). In post-adoption estrangement, these fractured parent-child relationships remain largely invisible because child welfare systems have limited mechanisms for tracking relational health once legal

¹ Although this article uses adoption-specific language, many of the issues discussed – including relational permanency, belonging, family connection, and estrangement – are also relevant to youth and families who achieve permanency through guardianship.

permanency has been achieved. As a result, little is known about the prevalence, causes, and long-term outcomes of estrangement following permanency.

Post-permanency support must be reimagined to prioritize the sustainability and well-being of the parent-child relationship throughout the permanency journey, not just the legal permanency of adoption or guardianship.

When Adoption Breaks Down: The Unseen Youth

When adoptive or guardianship relationships break down, especially for older youth, the consequences can be devastating and isolating. Many of these young people do not re-enter foster care, nor do they receive formal services. Instead, they often rely on informal survival strategies such as couch surfing, staying with friends, or living in unstable housing while navigating young adulthood alone. One young adult described their experience:²

“I didn’t have any place to go. I went to stay with my birth father, then with his mother, then back to my birth father, then back to my grandmother. I moved in with the father of my first child and then to a lady I met at my grandmother’s church. She saw that I was struggling and let me stay with her as long as I wanted.”

Experiences such as these illustrate the instability some young people face despite having achieved legal permanency. These youth are invisible in data systems. Because they are no longer in state custody and they have legal permanency, there is no mechanism to track their well-being or provide ongoing support.

In their search for identity and belonging, many estranged youth reconnect with birth families, a process which can be emotionally complex. While some find healing, others encounter unresolved trauma, rejection, or confusion. These journeys underscore the importance of relational continuity and support, even after finalization.

Estrangement is not always characterized by complete separation. Some young adults maintain contact with their adoptive families while experiencing a fundamental shift in the parent-child relationship. One young woman reflected:

“Now, I have an ok relationship with my adoptive family. We go to the same church. I don’t think of them as my parents, but our kids play together and my kids call their kids aunt and uncle...”

This young woman’s experience illustrates the complexity of relational permanency. Although some family connections remained, the parent-child relationship itself had changed in ways not captured by traditional measures of permanency.

² The quotations throughout this article are drawn from interviews with young adults who have lived experience with adoption and guardianship. Interviews were conducted as part of the Post-Adoption Center’s ongoing efforts to understand post-permanency experiences. Identifying details have been removed or modified to protect confidentiality.

The Fragility of the Parent-Child Bond

Adoptive and guardianship families often enter the process full of love and good intentions, but these things alone are not enough to sustain a relationship shaped by trauma, loss, and identity shifts. Several factors contribute to post-adoption estrangement:

- Unresolved trauma for the child that often manifests in challenging attachment struggles and behaviors.
- Lack of preparation for adoptive parents or guardians, especially around trauma-informed care.
- Unrealistic expectations and lack of knowledge surrounding bonding and attachment.
- Insufficient identity support that leaves youth feeling misunderstood or isolated.

When the parent-child bond fractures, the emotional toll on youth is profound. Many describe feelings of abandonment, shame, and confusion that often create core wounds within their whole identity formation. As one young adult with lived experience explained:

“I got pregnant, and my adoptive family was very religious and not happy with me. My adoptive mom, who thought she couldn’t have kids, had just found out that she was pregnant. We got into it and I left and moved in with my boyfriend. I wasn’t 18 yet. I knew I didn’t have to go, but also that they didn’t really want me to stay.”

This account illustrates how estrangement can arise from a convergence of developmental transitions, family expectations, and perceived rejection. Although the adoption remained legally intact, the young person’s sense of belonging within the family relationship had been profoundly disrupted. It highlights the human cost of relational breakdowns and the urgent need for systems that support families beyond finalization.

Reimagining Post-Adoption Support and the Importance of the Parent-Child Relationship

Success in child welfare has often been measured by whether legal permanency is achieved. However, permanency through adoption and guardianship is more than a legal status; it also includes the enduring relationships that support a young person’s sense of belonging and well-being. Recent research has called attention to the need for greater understanding of relational permanency and the long-term experiences of youth following legal permanency decisions (Osborn et al., 2025). The Post-Adoption Center Post-Permanency Model similarly identifies a focus on parent-child relationships as a core pillar of effective post-permanency support, emphasizing that strong, nurturing relationships can protect against instability and promote long-term well-being.

Relationship quality is at the heart of well-being for a family created through adoption or guardianship. As one young adult observed, educational opportunities and material stability did not necessarily translate into emotional connection:

“The state thinks that if they find a professional couple they will be good parents. My guardians were very college educated and they instilled the importance of education in me. I went to the best schools. But the guardian mom isn’t good at feelings. Now, I know what I can expect from them and what I can’t. And I think of them as my family.”

Their reflection highlights why relationship quality must be considered a core outcome of permanency, alongside safety, stability, and access to opportunity.

Adult adoptees who reported more positive relationships with their adoptive parents also reported lower levels of anxiety and depression (Baden et al., 2025). To proactively address post-adoption estrangement, systems must begin to shift from the focus on legal permanency to include a focus on relational permanency as well (Osborn et al., 2025). This means building systems which recognize and support the emotional, psychological, and relational needs of both youth and parents throughout their permanency journey.

Key components of relationship-centered post-permanency support include:

- Attachment-based interventions that help families build trust and connection.
- Trauma-responsive care that acknowledges the impact of early adversity.
- Comprehensive assessments to identify family needs early and accurately.
- Ongoing counseling and coaching for both youth and caregivers.
- Adoption-competent training for professionals and parents alike.

TBRI® (Trust-Based Relational Intervention®) can serve as a framework for strengthening systems and supporting the parent-child relationship. TBRI® is a holistic, attachment-based, trauma-informed model designed to support children and youth who have experienced adversity. TBRI® equips caregivers and professionals with practical strategies to address behavioral, emotional, and relational challenges by meeting the needs of the whole child. It is an evidence-based approach grounded in decades of research in attachment theory, sensory processing, and neuroscience. It is built on a set of integrated principles to empower families and professionals alike.

Additionally, the National Training and Development Curriculum (NTDC) equips adoptive and guardianship parents with the tools to support children who have experienced trauma, separation, and loss. These resources lay a critical foundation for long-term relational success.

Adoption and Guardianship Preparation Training (AGPT) can also strengthen pre-permanency preparation by helping prospective adoptive and guardianship parents deepen their understanding of themselves and the children they are welcoming. By addressing

expectations, trauma, and attachment while building a foundation for lasting commitment before finalization, AGPT can help families build the relational foundation needed to reduce the risk of later estrangement.

Assessing post-permanency success requires more than tracking foster care reentry or legal status, family well-being, parent-child relationship strength, and relational permanency are important indicators of stability. Most importantly, support must be proactive, not reactive. Services should begin before finalization and continue well into adulthood, recognizing that relationships evolve and require ongoing care, particularly when the complexities of adoption and guardianship are involved.

Conclusion

As the research and lived experiences highlighted in this article demonstrate, a finalized adoption or guardianship can remain legally intact even when relational permanency has been lost. Legal permanency can create conditions for stability, but it does not guarantee emotional connection, belonging, or enduring family relationships.

As child welfare systems continue to examine long-term permanency outcomes, it is important to consider not only whether adoption or guardianship was achieved, but also whether relationships endured. The true measure of permanency success is not simply legal, but the strength of the parent-child bond, the presence of lasting support, and a young person's enduring sense of belonging. When relationships become the focus, permanency can become more than a legal outcome. It can become what it was always intended to be: a lifelong source of connection, healing, belonging, and family.

To delve further into this topic, check out the Post-Adoption Center Resource Library:
www.postadoptioncenter.org/resource-library



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