

## The importance of reconnection for care leavers

Being in care for a lengthy period can disrupt relationships, confuse a person's sense of identity and lead to isolation and loneliness on leaving care.

This can be addressed, and a successful transition to independence and social inclusion assisted, by the presence of enduring relationships with family members and significant others from the young person's past.

Reconnection aims to identify these people and establish safe, supportive relationships that contribute to a sense of belonging and personal identity.

While family contact may have been a part of the young person's care experience, their leaving care plan should have a specific focus on building a network of people who will remain a part of their life well after they have left care. This is often referred to as relational or emotional permanency.

**Relational permanency provides stability when everything else in a care leaver's life may be changing.**

## Piecing the identity puzzle together

Life Story work helps a young person understand their past, make sense of the present and think about their future. It should provide an accurate and clear understanding of how and why they came into care in a respectful and supportive way.

Life Story work contributes to the development of identity and can be used to reflect on who the young person would like to reconnect with and the best approach to take.



While reconnection relates to people (family of origin, previous carers, former friends etc.) it also considers aspects of the young person's history and identity. In addition to significant people, it looks for connections to culture, community, language, religion and past recreational activities.

**Reconnection provides the pieces of the puzzle that help a care leaver understand their history, be resilient in the face of adversity and move forward with confidence.**

## Identifying a network for life

A wide range of family and community members with meaningful connections to the young person should be identified as a potential network. From these, a smaller core group can be approached to seek commitment to support the young person across their lifetime.

The best place to start looking for people to reconnect with is with the young person. As reconnection to family, culture, community etc. can also involve people unknown to them a file review should be conducted and family members and carers consulted to identify other significant people.

Information about locating and engaging relatives of young people in care is available from [familyfinding.org](http://familyfinding.org).

**Having a few key people who will always be there for you creates a sense of permanent belonging.**

## Supporting positive reconnection

Preparation for reconnection should start early and ideally will be completed by the time the young person leaves care.

It might start with extra contact visits or changes to the way contact is structured, possibly as reconnection sessions. While contact must always be conducted within safe parameters, it is an opportunity to support young people and their birth families to build stronger, more positive relationships.

Consideration is given to what support the young person needs to explore their feelings and understand their relationships. Family or individual therapy may be required before, during or after contact.

The strengths and needs of each family member are considered during reconnection sessions. This includes what they can bring to the relationship and how they can contribute to the young person's wellbeing and sense of belonging. For the birth parents, assistance may be needed to address the issues that led to their child being placed in care.

**The young person has the right to lead decisions about who to contact and how to go about engaging with them.**