

Renewing our commitment to permanence for children and youth

By Sarah B. Greenblatt and Mary LeBeau

All children, regardless of race, culture or national origin, have the fundamental need for consistent parenting and the continuity of family relationships through which they can feel safe and nurtured, receive opportunities for developmental stimulation and growth, and form a secure identity with a sense of belonging. This is the essence of permanency planning and the underlying framework for the specialized social work practice it requires with all children and youth in foster care.

Understanding history

The concept of permanency planning for children in out-of-home care emerged in the late 1960's in response to concern about the hundreds of thousands of children found to be "adrift" in the foster care system with no family to call their own. Permanency planning was initially intended to safely limit entry into placement, and to limit the time children spend in out-of-care. Permanency policy and practice strategies emerged because research showed that the trauma of separation, loss and unresolved grief as well as the uncertain and long-term nature of the foster care experience had a negative impact on children's overall sense of belonging, identity formation, and emotional wellbeing.¹

By the late 1970's the first federal permanency legislation was passed - the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 - to preserve the connections of at-risk Native American children with their families and their tribes through 'active efforts' to strengthen Indian families. Two years later, Congress passed the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (PL:96-272) which required states to make 'reasonable efforts' to prevent unnecessary placements in foster care, reunify children in foster care with their parents within 18 months, or move to find another permanent family through adoption. In 1997, Congress mandated that states make even greater 'reasonable efforts' to find permanency for children in foster care through the tighter time limits for decision-making found in the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA).

Yet too many children and youth still enter and remain in our state child welfare systems across the country, with a preponderance of poor children and a disproportionate number of children of color.

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Keeping the focus on children's needs

Engaging in the practice of permanency planning is perhaps the most complex social work practice there is. Social workers, attorneys and judges are charged with balancing the rights and needs of parents and children with the harm that can come from the passage of time and delays in planning and decision-making. While child welfare practitioners are required to strengthen or establish lifetime family relationships for children, they must concurrently work to ensure children's present safety, well-being and emotional security; work through the pain of children's past traumatic experiences; and plan for children's future family ties.

Permanency planning is also complex because child welfare agencies must deal with the competing needs and interests of more than the families and children served, for example: dwindling budgets, rapid leadership changes, and the impact of high profile child deaths. Yet, child welfare professionals must also maintain a high priority on meeting the needs of children and youth for consistent parenting and con-

tinuity in their family relationships and connections regardless of the external pressures.

Having a clear definition of permanence

States must be guided by a clear definition of permanence for children and youth. Having permanence means having an enduring family relationship that is safe and meant to last a lifetime; offers the legal rights and social status of full family membership; provides for physical, emotional, social, cognitive and spiritual well-being; and assures lifelong connections to extended family, siblings, other significant adults, family history and traditions, race and ethnic heritage, culture, religion and language.² The range of permanency outcomes must be considered individually for each child and youth, and include: remaining safely with birth parents or family members; reunification with birth parents or family members; guardianship with relatives; adoption by relatives or other families; and only in special circumstances a planned alternative permanent living arrangement.

Being child-centered, family-focused and community-based

Increasingly public child welfare agencies, courts and community partners have begun to work more collaboratively with parents, family members and children to address the many challenges of engaging in inclusive and timely permanency planning services. These collaborative practices form the framework that guide best practices in child welfare and permanency planning today³ and may represent a significant culture shift for many child welfare agencies and family court systems.

The values and principles of child-centered and family-focused practice include: collaborative, open and inclusive practices with birth families, relatives, foster and adoptive families and youth themselves; community partnerships that support community-based practice and family-based foster care services; culturally relevant and linguistically competent programs and practices; non-adversarial problem-solving through family team planning and decision-making practice strategies; and the earlier consideration of the range of the range of permanency options for children when out-of-home care is necessary. States are finding that the mix of ongoing, child-centered/family-focused casework practices can contribute to more timely and collaborative planning for children's immediate safety and future security, assuring that children and youth have enduring family relationships regardless of the permanency outcome.

Using teaming practice strategies

Historically, the social work profession has promoted working in partnership with families rather than doing for or to them. The partnership approach logically translates to child welfare practice today by facilitating teams of family members and others who know and care about children to share in planning and decision-making about their safety, permanency and well-being.

Over the past eighteen months, Casey Family Services has embraced a process of permanency teaming with children, youth and families as our core strategy to achieve more timely, inclusive and quality child welfare services. The permanency teaming process is grounded in comprehensive permanency practice that addresses the negative impact on child development of early trauma of child abuse and neglect, as well as the impact of separation and loss, multiple relationship disruptions and unresolved grief associated with placement in foster care.

The permanency teaming approach engages children and youth in their own permanency planning as they identify past and current attachment figures as potential team members. The child/youth, parents

(birth, foster, adoptive), family members, and other significant adults together with professionals are actively engaged in a shared decision making and cooperative planning process. The permanency team is wrapped around the child/youth, develops and implements a customized plan for safety, permanency and well-being including comprehensive preparation for adulthood. Preparatory individual and joint meetings with team members are held prior to large team meetings. Permanency conversations are initiated and deepened with and between the child/youth, parents, foster parents and available family members - exploring their needs, hopes and desires for enduring family relationships. The permanency team continues to meet until a permanency outcome is achieved typically involving the identification of a primary parenting relationship and secondary adult relationships to help support and sustain family permanency beyond agency involvement.

Strengthening and finding families for children and youth

Renewing a commitment to permanence for children and youth is complex. It involves balancing the rights and needs of parents and children. It means sharing the power that too often rests with social workers and courts when children and families become involved with the child welfare system. It means expanding resources for children and youth from within the 'pond' of families already known to them before dipping into the 'pool' of unknown families. And most importantly, renewing our commitment to permanence for children and youth means feeling the urgency of time to strengthen and/or establish lifetime family relationships for children often thought to be 'too old' or 'not ready' for a family. As one youth in Connecticut so eloquently commented: "...it shouldn't take so long - lots of damage is done while waiting."

Sarah B. Greenblatt is the Director of the Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice at Casey Family Services. She can be reached at 203-401-6900 sgreenblatt@caseyfamilyservices.org. Mary LeBeau is a Project Manager at the Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice at Casey Family Services. She can be reached at 203-401-6900 mlebeau@caseyfamilyservices.org

¹Sudia, C. 1986. "Preventing Out-of-Home Placement of Children: The First Step to Permanency Planning". *Children Today*, 15(6) 4.

²Greenblatt, S.B. and Day, P. 2000. "Renewing Our Commitment to Permanency for Children - Wingspread Conference Summary Report". CWLA Press.

³Adapted from: A. Emler, J. Lahti, G. Downs, A. McKay, & S. Downs (for Regional Research Institute for Human Services, Portland State University, Oregon). (n.d.) *Overcoming barriers to planning for children in foster care*. (DHEW Publication No. 78-30138). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. A.N. Maluccio, E. Fein and KLAL Olmstead. (1986). *Permanency planning for children: Concepts and methods*. New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall. Frey, Lauren. *Merging Permanency and Independent Living: Lifelong Family Relationships and Life Skills for Older Youth*. NRCYDUpdate. National Resource Center for Youth Development. Summer 2004 (nrcys.ou.edu).

Greenblatt, SB; Day, P; Barbell, K. Yu, E. (2000). *Renewing Our Commitment to Permanency for Children. An Issue Brief*, Child Welfare League of America: CWLA Press

³Ohl, J. January 28, 2003. "Partners in Progress: Improving Outcomes through Systemic Change". Presentation at the Annual Meeting of States and Tribes. Washington, DC.