

Building Family Relationships

Using the Permanency Teaming Process to Connect Young People with Family

More child welfare systems are routinely involving families in case planning and decision making. At present, 45 states use some form of family-inclusion strategy. Through its direct service work in New England and Baltimore, Maryland, and technical assistance delivered by the Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice, Casey Family Services is finding success¹ with its Permanency Teaming Process. Its goal: to ensure that all young people leave foster care with lasting family relationships.

WHY PERMANENCY TEAMING?

Permanency Teaming is based on a hypothesis: By building strong family relationships, young people will have the necessary foundation on which to build their lives. They won't languish in foster care or institutions, or face the potentially devastating outcomes associated with running away from or aging out² of foster care without family. They won't reunify with family only to re-enter foster care.

Permanency Teaming grows out of the restorative justice movement, which puts those most involved in a challenging situation at the center of decision making.³ To Casey Family Services, this means involving the young person and parents, family, and significant adults – a young person's natural network – in a planning and decision-making process that addresses a young person's needs for safety, well-being, and family.

Permanency Teaming recognizes that all families have strengths, are experts on themselves, and with support can make well-informed decisions about keeping their children safe. Not only can outcomes for young people

improve when families participate on teams, but the process of collaboration can result in better solutions than when responsibility rests on one person or the agency alone. Teaming respects parents' and relatives' connections to a young person; it lets a young person know he or she is valued; it connects the young person with his or her culture and family history.

How it works

Permanency Teaming engages members of a young person's natural network as active planners and decision makers. Social workers facilitate the teaming process, using a series of meetings to:

- focus team members on understanding and meeting a young person's needs;
- address trauma related to abuse, neglect, or foster care;⁴
- explore strategies to connect a young person with a supportive family and out of foster care; and
- achieve and support family permanence.⁵

Permanency Teaming is grounded in comprehensive permanency practice⁶ and uses creative family search strategies⁷ and concurrent planning to develop potential permanency options with a young person. Teaming reunifies children with parents or kin whenever possible; when a parent can't care for a child full time, efforts are made to maintain safe, long-term family connections in addition to building guardianship or adoptive families.

With Permanency Teaming, most casework activities take place within an ongoing and shared planning and decision-making process. Case workers use four meeting types: safety parameters, individual, joint, and large team meetings. The process continues until a young person has a legal family and leaves the child welfare system. If legal permanence is not possible, the team seeks to solidify old relationships and build new ones, with a focus on long-term commitment. This often includes using

permanency pacts,⁸ ceremonies, and rituals that underscore interdependence and belonging. The Permanency Teaming Process can be reactivated as a post-permanency service, or after a young person leaves the child welfare system if he or she needs help connecting with or building family.

DISTINCTIVE ELEMENTS: A PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE

Permanency Teaming transforms the roles and relationships of social workers, agencies, communities, families, and young people. Case workers facilitate the process, which engages these disparate individuals in reviewing and monitoring a child's strengths and needs and exploring permanency options. Using the four meeting types, the social worker helps the team plan for the child's current and future relational, material, and developmental needs and move the case to closure. In this way, social workers are "bridges" to safe, stable, and secure families.

Using this process, agency outcomes are viewed through a permanency lens, and success is measured by a system's ability to help young people leave foster care in a timely manner and grow up in families. Indicators of collaboration and family involvement are gathered, such as whether team meetings include the appropriate mix of participants (e.g., young person, family and natural network members, child welfare staff, guardians ad litem, service providers, and others). Participants' satisfaction with the Permanency Teaming Process, team plans, and the eventual outcome also is assessed.

Whether Permanency Teaming is used as an exclusive youth- and family-involvement strategy or to enrich an existing teaming model, the process involves five distinct practice elements.

An ongoing process

Relationship building takes time; so does planning for a young person's future. Thus Permanency Teaming is not only about planning a placement move or responding to a crisis. Rather, it builds relationships and explores plans and options until safety, well-being, and permanence are achieved. Team members can continue to be an informal support network to the youth even after permanence is achieved.

Youth as engaged participants

Permanency Teams are child centered and family focused. They wrap around the young person. No matter the permanency goal, planning is done with, not to or for, the young person, aiming for the fullest involvement possible. This requires customized, creative, developmentally sound practice strategies at every stage of the process. If a young person's age or readiness precludes involvement in actual meetings, his or her voice, needs, and strengths are represented in tangible ways – through video, audio, artistic, or written contributions to meetings, or via an adult who can speak on the youth's behalf.

Natural network exploration

Young people, especially older youth, come to foster care with existing relationships. Permanency Teaming uses a variety of creative family finding strategies to explore these natural networks, recognizing that permanent family connections are often closer than we realize. The idea is to locate and involve these adults, as appropriate, in planning. Not all identified adults will be placement or permanency resources, but many, through team participation, can provide support and continuity.

Carefully planned preparatory work

Permanency Teaming involves two kinds of preparation:

- Using trauma-informed clinical skills to prepare for and promote positive family change. Permanency Teaming includes assisting all members of the team, but especially the young person, to identify, understand, and cope with the losses associated with abuse, neglect, and foster care. This helps young people clarify what has happened in their lives, address complex family relationships, and have a say in permanency planning.
- Setting the stage for team meetings. Team meetings are only as productive as the work that precedes them. Through individual and small group conversations, social workers involve team members with different backgrounds, roles, and opinions in understanding the young person and what he or she needs to be safe and connected with family. Team members also get to know one another and understand potential areas of team conflict and strength prior to group team meetings.

Strong, permanent family relationships, no matter a young person's age

Central to Permanency Teaming is a belief that all of us need family, no matter how old, troubled, or “ready” we are – and that the state makes a poor long-term substitute parent. The process focuses the energy, caring, and planning skills of a disparate group of people on the safety, well-being, and family needs of one particular young person. Once family roots are clarified, nurtured, and tended, the young person can get back to the business of growing up, whether he or she is a toddler or approaching adulthood. The Permanency Teaming Process is not finished until a young person has a secure parenting relationship and an understanding of what brought him or her into – and out of – the child welfare system.

NEW ROLES FOR PERMANENCY SOCIAL WORKERS

Permanency social workers need to ensure that permanency outcomes stick – that emotional, legal, concrete, and other issues are addressed so that reunification, kinship care, adoption, or guardianship arrangements hold. To meet these goals, social workers need permanency preparation expertise, including knowledge of specific skills and responsibilities.

Social worker skills

Advocating. The permanency social worker believes in every youth's right to family, and ensures that each youth finds a permanent legal parent and lifelong family connections. The social worker is the primary advocate for permanence on behalf of each youth, and assumes a leadership role in educating and engaging others (e.g., public agency staff, therapists, group home/residential treatment staff, court personnel, and others) as partners in the process. The social worker advocates for the youth's needs for safety, permanence, and well-being, and makes sure the team planning process comprehensively addresses those needs.

Facilitating. The social worker convenes and guides the Permanency Teaming Process, facilitating relationships among youth, parents, family, and other team members.

The social worker does not control the team *outcomes*, but rather protects and guides the teaming *process*, orchestrating the involvement of all team members, setting the pace, and maintaining the momentum until a timely permanency outcome is reached. The social worker develops relationships with the youth, parents, and other team members to help them establish and strengthen their relationships as a supportive family network that continues after agency exit.

Preparing. The social worker designs casework interventions that are strategically aimed at preparing the youth to understand and engage in family relationships. He or she prepares parents and family to make informed decisions and sustain lifelong commitments to the youth. The social worker uses a variety of permanency preparation tools and techniques. The social worker “leaves no stone unturned” in seeking out and developing current and potential family relationships, and employs a “whatever it takes” attitude in preparing them for parenting and supporting the youth.

Connecting. The social worker uses his or her relationship with a youth as a “bridge” to family relationships, connecting or reconnecting the youth to family. The youth's relationship with a primary parent is the central relationship to be strengthened, developed, and supported. The social worker builds a relationship with the youth to efficiently and effectively accomplish this purpose. The social worker connects youth or family members to essential resources by mobilizing team members to address needs that emerge during the planning process.

Supporting. The social worker supports the youth in exiting foster care to a permanent family safely, securely, and as quickly as possible. The social worker focuses on “working him or herself out of a job” in the youth's life. All social work activities are geared toward supporting the youth as a successful family member and supporting families in their roles as central figures in a youth's life, now and in the future.

Social worker responsibilities

Permanency social workers have particular responsibilities, including to:

- develop and facilitate a youth's permanency team;
- assess a youth and prepare him or her for permanence;
- engage and assess family connections to identify possible permanency options;
- identify and prepare a permanent parent or family;
- transition the youth to a permanent family;
- complete legal finalization of reunification, adoption, or guardianship; and,
- guide the family and team to develop a plan for post-permanency support.

WHICH YOUNG PEOPLE BENEFIT FROM PERMANENCY TEAMING?

Permanency Teaming can be used effectively with children of all ages, including those who:

- *are in different family settings and situations.* Teaming can be used with young people living with birth parents or other family members; at risk of entering or in foster care; in residential, treatment, or group homes; or in guardianship care. It can benefit young people reuniting with family, approaching or past emancipation, whose parents' rights have been terminated, or for whom no known family exists.
- *have different case goals.* Teaming is used with young people whose case plan goals include family preservation, reunification, adoption, legal guardianship, kinship placement, or APPLA (another planned permanent living arrangement).
- *are at different developmental stages.* For young children, Permanency Teaming supports reunification when possible and involves developing concurrent plans, so changes in family circumstances don't slow progress toward permanence. For older youth who need family and preparation for adulthood, Permanency Teaming helps address educational, vocational, and career needs while simultaneously developing, repairing, or building needed family relationships.
- *are in settings beyond child welfare.* Young people in mental health, criminal justice, and court settings

benefit from Permanency Teaming because it brings together the people, resources, and relationships needed to address difficult problems, leverage strengths, and build lasting relationships.

This is a publication of the Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice. The Center provides training and technical assistance based on the work of Casey Family Services. Casey Family Services provides comprehensive permanency services in New England and Baltimore, Maryland; it is the direct services agency of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. For more information, visit www.caseyfamilyservices.org, www.aecf.org, and www.youthpermanence.org or contact the Center at 203.401.6937.

ENDNOTES

¹ Since introducing the Permanency Teaming Process in 2005, the number and rate of children leaving Casey Family Services' foster care to permanence has increased significantly. Casey Family Services. (2009). *Permanency outcomes for foster care 2005-2008: An agency overview*. <http://www.caseyfamilyservices.org/index.php/ourwork/permanencyteaming/>

² Aging out refers to youth who exit foster care at age 18 or older, often without a connection to a family.

³ Among the team-driven practice models used in child welfare are Family Group Decision Making, Family Team Meetings, Team Decision Making, and others. Teaming: Engaging Families in Decision Making. (2009, May). *Connections Count*. http://www.caseyfamilyservices.org/index.php/connectionscount/cc_archive/212

⁴ Trauma-informed practice is key to permanency teaming, as research suggests the chances of achieving permanence are significantly diminished when emotional and behavioral issues are left untreated.

⁵ Casey Family Services uses a consensus definition of permanence. Casey Family Services. (2005). *A call to action: An integrated approach to youth permanence and preparation for adulthood* (p.3). http://www.caseyfamilyservices.org/pdfs/casey_permanency_0505.pdf

⁶ Permanency practice is the set of social work skills, practices, and strategies that connect young people with the family relationships and community supports they need to thrive outside the child welfare system.

⁷ Several tools offer information on family finding 1) Catholic Community Services of Western Washington & EMQ Children and Family Services. (2008). *Family search and engagement: A comprehensive practice guide*. Tacoma, WA: Author. http://www.emq.org/press/docs/FSE_guide.pdf; 2) Child Focus. (2007). *Making 'relative search' happen: A guide to finding and involving relatives at every stage of the child welfare process*. <http://www.childfocuspartners.com/images/RelativeSearchGuide10-15.pdf>; and 3) Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association. (2008). *Completing the circle: Uncovering, discovering, and creating connections for your foster and adoptive children* [Booklet]. Ankeny, IA: Author. <http://www.ifapa.org/resources/CompletingtheCircle.pdf>

⁸ FosterClub. (2006). *Permanency pact: Life-long, kin-like connections between a youth and a supportive adult*. http://www.fosterclub.com/files/PermPact_o.pdf