

National Resource Center for Foster Care & Permanency Planning

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Tools for Permanency

Tool # 1: Concurrent Permanency Planning

The National Resource Center for Foster Care & Permanency Planning at the Hunter College School of Social Work of the City University of New York is committed to the pursuit of excellence in child welfare service delivery. As a Center dedicated to action and change, our work focuses on building the capacity of child welfare agencies to meet the needs of children at risk of removal from their families and those already placed in out-of-home care. Our "Tools for Permanency" aim to promote family-centered and collaborative approaches to achieving safety, timely permanency and the overall well-being of children and families within the child welfare system.

Concurrent Permanency Planning...What is it?

Concurrent Permanency Planning offers caseworkers a structured approach to moving children more quickly from the uncertainty of foster care to the stability and security of a permanent family. Historically, caseworkers have been taught to plan in a straight-line, sequential fashion: first to work diligently toward reunification with the biological family; and if after a year—or two or three—reunification looks unlikely, to then switch gears and start planning for adoption or another permanency option. Unfortunately, by this time, the parents have usually become alienated from their child and the case planning process, the child will probably have to be moved from the temporary foster home to a pre-adoptive home, and the child's length of stay in foster care has been prolonged unnecessarily.

The Concurrent Permanency Planning approach has been designed as an alternative to sequential permanency planning. Quite simply, it emphasizes working toward family reunification, while at the same time establishing an alternative or back-up permanency plan to be implemented if children cannot safely return to their biological parents. While "Concurrent Planning" was originally designed to expedite the adoption process for young children identified as likely to linger in foster care (Katz, Spoonmore & Robinson, 1994), we believe a Concurrent Permanency Planning focus holds equal promise for expediting family reunifications because of its structured, focused and respectful involvement of parents and family members early on in the planning process.

When and where did the concept of Concurrent Permanency Planning originate and where is it being used today?

The concept of "Concurrent Planning" was developed over 15 years ago at Lutheran Social Services of Washington and Idaho by Linda Katz and Norma Spoonmore, as well as Chris Robinson of the Washington Division of Children and Family Services (Katz, Spoonmore & Robinson, 1994). Today, variations of Concurrent Permanency Planning are gaining in popularity around the country, and models are being planned and tested in: Baltimore, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Mississippi, Montana, New Jersey, New York

City, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Utah. States are applying the principles and framework of Concurrent Permanency Planning to targeted groups of very young children likely to linger in foster care, as well as focusing on expedited permanency planning for older children in care. Children's developmental need for early permanency has guided the new federal Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, and is rapidly guiding state legislation and program policy development.

Why is timely permanency planning important for children?

It is widely acknowledged that all children require security, love, acceptance, connectedness, a moral/spiritual framework, and lifetime families for their healthy growth and development. They also need stable families and supportive communities especially in the early years of life to form the secure attachments so vital to positive self-esteem, meaningful relationships, positive school achievement, and success in the adult world of family and work. Sadly, child welfare systems across the country have had an uneven history of meeting children's developmental needs for stability and continuity in their family relationships. In fact, the long term, uncertain and unpredictable nature inherent in the foster care experience has the potential to work against children's healthy growth and development.

Why is earlier permanency planning needed?

Despite the emphasis on permanency and other child welfare reforms of the Federal Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of children requiring out-of-home care. In 1996, there were close to 500,000 children residing in foster care nationwide, more than twice the number of children in care a decade before (Barbell, 1996).

Placement trends show that since the late 1980's infants and young children under age four have become the fastest growing population in need of foster care (U.S. House of Representatives, 1989). Additionally, when placed, these young children remain in care longer, and experience frequent moves resulting in traumatic relationship disruptions. And if a child happens to be African-American and male, his chances of remaining in care more than 3 or 4 years and experiencing many moves are even greater (George, Wulczyn & Harden, 1994).

While the majority of children entering out-of-home care return to their families within two years, it is estimated that one quarter of the children in care – many of whom entered as infants – have no plans for being either reunited with family or adopted (Tartara, 1993).

Thus, child welfare systems need a more structured and culturally responsive emphasis on the urgent need for permanency, especially for this younger population of children in foster care – with family engagement, assessment, case planning and decision-making services that reflect children's developmental need for stability and continuity in their family relationships, especially in the earliest years of life.

What are the goals of Concurrent Permanency Planning?

Concurrent Permanency Planning programs use a mix of family-centered casework and legal strategies that are designed to:

- Achieve early permanency for children
- Decrease children's length of stay in foster care
- Minimize the negative impact of separation and loss on children
- Reduce the number of moves and relationship disruptions children experience in foster care
- Develop a network of permanency planning resource parents (relatives or non-relatives) who can work towards reunification and also serve as permanency resources for children, and
- Maintain continuity in children's family and sibling relationships.

How does Concurrent Permanency Planning work?

Concurrent Permanency Planning speaks to children's urgent need for continuity and stability in family relationships. It is rooted in child-focused, family-centered and culturally competent practice philosophies, as well as theories about the nature of a child's sense of time, supports for secure attachment and bonding, and the impact of separation, loss and grief on child development.

Briefly, this is how Concurrent Permanency Planning works:

- From the moment a child is placed into foster care, frequent parent-child visits are encouraged and focused intensive services are provided with birth families, giving reunification every chance to work.
- Early on, birth families are informed of the importance of their involvement and actions in planning for the return of the child and they are also informed of the legal consequences should they fail to prepare for the child's return in a timely way.
- An early differential assessment of the families' strengths, needs and current/past problems assists in determining the need to place the child with "permanency planning resource families" who are actively engaged in supporting family reunification efforts, but are also willing to serve as a permanency resource if the child cannot return to the birth parents.
- Systems for family case conferencing and targeted case review support timely case planning and decision-making.
- Should reunification seem unlikely, the parents are carefully counseled about relinquishment options and any possibilities of open or cooperative adoption arrangements.
- Concurrent Permanency Planning encourages the adults who care about the child to become collaborators rather than adversaries as they care for and plan where that child will grow up.

In addition, the Concurrent Permanency Planning framework presents a logical opportunity to include:

- Family Group Decision Making strategies to increase options for parents, extended family members and other significant family resources to be involved early on in formulating plans for children, and
- Child Welfare Mediation as a non-adversarial approach to resolving disputes about permanency planning and child welfare issues, or as an alternative to lengthy and often painful termination of parental rights proceedings when efforts to plan for family reunification are not successful.

Getting Started

You may be considering starting a Concurrent Permanency Planning project in your state or locality. If so, here are some steps toward implementation to be considered:

- Review data about children in care in your state or locality to determine a baseline and whether there is a need for earlier decision-making, as well as to set program goals and track progress over time.
- Assess whether initial changes in states laws and regulations to comply with the Adoption and Safe Families Act will need to be "fine tuned" to assure access to services and expedited decision making.
- Assess your organization's readiness for change and whether there is organizational leadership committed to developing this new permanency initiative.
- Evaluate your organization's interest in and commitment to developing a family-centered, child-focused, strengths-based permanency planning practice philosophy.
- Involve stakeholders (staff, parents, resource families, judges, attorneys, service providers, community residents) in planning and implementing the project.
- Develop policies and procedures for practice to determine who will do what, when and how. (i.e. family assessment, case review, preparation for judicial permanency reviews, decision making)

- Strengthen or develop linkages to services for parents, resource families and children.
- Determine a strategy and agency capability to provide sufficient training and support to staff, resource families and stakeholders.
- Design specialized strategies for recruitment, retention, education, support and involvement of resource families.

As with any project, careful examination of the conditions that already exist, deciding what needs to change, and proper short and long term planning will greatly improve your chances of successfully implementing a Concurrent Permanency Planning effort.

Commonly asked questions about Concurrent Permanency Planning

Isn't it a difficult task for case workers and foster parents to plan for reunification as well as plan for a possible adoption should reunification fail?

Yes, it is a challenge, and casework and supervising staff as well as foster parents will need a lot of training and support from the child welfare agency to be comfortable and successful in what could be a new role. Basically, as staff and foster parents become partners in the permanency planning process with birth families, they are more likely to focus on the importance of the child's needs, and work more cooperatively toward creating the best possible permanent situation for that child in a timely way. Partnerships between birth families and foster families have maintained continuity in children's important relationships after reunification or adoption.

Will Concurrent Permanency Planning help us to manage our foster care cases?

Yes. Concurrent permanency planning has achieved positive results through a mix of family-centered case planning processes and targeted case review methods. Recent federal publications have recognized Concurrent Permanency Planning as a method to efficiently and effectively overcome barriers to securing permanent families for children in foster care (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1997, and U.S. General Accounting Office, 1997). Concurrent Permanency Planning is designed in keeping with the expectations of Public Law 96-272 (Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980) related to timely, goal-oriented, least restrictive child welfare practice. In addition, Concurrent Permanency Planning will be beneficial as states strive to comply with the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-89) which calls for children to have permanency planning hearings within one year of entering out-of-home care rather than the 18 month review expectation set forth in P.L. 96-272.

Can we expect any cost savings?

Yes. After the initial investment for planning and starting up the program, there should be cost savings in several areas. For example, early reunifications can shorten the time children spend in care, and non-adversarial strategies of conflict resolution or family group decision making can decrease the legal costs involved in lengthy termination of parental rights proceedings, that result in extended lengths of time in care. In most localities, these savings have been reinvested in support services for families and children.

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We'd like to help you get started!

Services available from the National Resource Center for Foster Care & Permanency Planning (NRCFCPP) include:

- **Information Services** –We can connect you with child welfare agencies around the country that are now considering or implementing innovative program models. Reading materials and bibliographies are also available.
- **Training and Technical Assistance** – The NRCFCPP can provide consultation and/or training as you consider or plan for a new initiative. We can arrange to meet with you for a brief consultation, we can make an informational presentation at your agency or in your community, or we can work with you to develop a comprehensive in-service training program at the local or state-wide level for casework, supervisory, managerial and/or training staff, as well as attorneys and judges.

If you are interested in working with the NRCFCPP, you can start with a phone call, a brief letter or an e-mail message. Let us know what you're thinking about doing, and we'll work with you to plan the kind of help you'll need to get your project up and running. We can help you figure out how intensive your training program should be, and what costs might be involved for your agency. [Note: The NRCFCPP is funded by DHHS/ACYF/Children's Bureau. If yours is a public child welfare agency, you may be eligible for free training and/or technical assistance approved by your regional office of the Administration for Children, Youth and Families.]

Materials Available from NRCFCPP

Tools for Permanency

- **Concurrent Permanency Planning** – an approach to permanency planning which works toward reunification while exploring other options for the child, simultaneously rather than sequentially.
- **Family Group Decision Making** – outlines two models for early inclusion of a child's immediate and extended family in permanency planning decision making.
- **Child Welfare Mediation** – a newly emerging tool to engage families in decision making in a non-adversarial manner.
- **Relative Care Options** – explores the challenges involved in foster parenting by members of the child's extended family. (not yet available)

Legislative Summaries

- Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (Public Law 105-89)
- Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (Public Law 96-272)
- Personal Responsibility & Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (Public Law 104-193)
- Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (Public Law 104-235)

For more information, contact us at:

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