

Three Concurrent Planning Programs: How They Benefit Children and Support Permanency Planning Families

Executive Summary

North American Council on Adoptable Children



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INTRODUCTION

Almost 500,000 U.S. children currently reside in foster care. Children under the age of five are twice as likely as older children to enter foster care, and infants are at the highest risk for long-term foster care (Goerge et al., 1996). Many of these children will never return to their birth families. Yet security with an alternative family proves to be an elusive dream for many foster children. Federal studies estimate that children with formal plans for adoption remain in care between 3.5 and 5.5 years before joining their “forever” family. Around the country, child advocates, child welfare officials, and the public ask why so many children remain mired in the permanent “temporary” custody of child protection systems.

In 1996, President Clinton directed policy makers and elected officials to undertake reform efforts and move more vulnerable children from foster care to adoption. In 1997 the U.S. Congress passed the Adoption and Safe Families Act, a law that provides states with incentives to find adoptive or other homes for foster children and prioritizes child safety in all decisions concerning family preservation and reunification. The Act also allows state and county social service agencies to undertake “concurrent planning” efforts for foster care children.

Concurrent planning is a permanency planning practice that—

- works towards family reunification, while at the same time developing an alternative permanent plan, such as adoption or legal guardianship;
- emphasizes careful assessment of birth families to determine the likelihood of reunification, and provides birth families with intensive, time-limited services to address their central problem;
- places children in permanency planning foster homes—families able to commit until the case is resolved and beyond; and
- targets young children because they suffer separations acutely.

Concurrent planning social workers—

- honestly and fully apprise birth parents of the childhood effects of multiple separations and long stays in foster care. Concurrent planning social workers and parents also discuss all case requirements, service options, and time limits. This communication technique is known as “full disclosure;”
- search for absent fathers, non-custodial parents, and relatives within the first three months of placement; and



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- plan meaningful visits for the child with birth parents based on the child's developmental needs.

At Lutheran Social Services (LSS) of Washington and Idaho, which is the model for most other concurrent planning programs around the country, the average length of a foster care stay, from intake to reunification or termination of parental rights, is 10 months. Ninety-two percent of children in the program have only one placement while in the care of LSS (Katz, 1996).

I. CONCURRENT PLANNING PROGRAMS IN CALIFORNIA AND COLORADO

In California, San Mateo County Human Service officials attribute shorter foster care stays and low foster care re-entry rates to concurrent planning, in large part. San Mateo County Human Services, Youth and Family Services Division, began their concurrent planning and foster adoption program in 1980. From 1990 to 1996, the median length of stay for San Mateo county children entering out-of-home care for the first time was five months, compared to 17 months for children entering out-of-home care in California as a whole (Needell, et al., 1997). In 1993, the rate for San Mateo County children re-entering care for a second time after return home was 12 percent, compared with 19 percent for children re-entering care in the San Francisco Bay Area as a whole (Needell et al., 1997).

In Colorado, Jefferson County was the first county to tackle implementation of Colorado's 1994 Expedited Permanency Planning (EPP) legislation. Concurrent planning was the chosen model of delivering EPP services. A recently completed study commissioned by the Colorado Department of Human Services found that in Jefferson County, children who received concurrent planning services achieved permanence at 12 months at almost twice the rate as children who did not receive these services (Schene, 1997).

II. THE BENEFITS OF CONCURRENT PLANNING

Concurrent Planning Stresses the Importance of Attachment

A young child's need for security is so essential that he will not master the building blocks of life until his basic trust needs are met. Language and intellectual development and the ability to interact with others are seriously compromised when family moorings are insecure. The concurrent planning philosophy emphasizes the attachment needs of children—especially young children. Concurrent planning safeguards childhood attachments by building a stronger bond between the child and his birth parents through reunification, or by preserving the tie between the child and his permanency planning parents through adoption.

Concurrent planning enjoins child welfare agencies and juvenile courts to reconnect with the tenets of child development and attachment, and reintegrate these principles into practice. Agencies that develop concurrent planning programs—

- provide attachment theory training for social workers. Workers are taught to evaluate the childhood effects of multiple separations, neglect, and abuse.



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- teach other concurrent planning treatment team members about attachment. Attorneys and foster parents learn about the importance of attachment and the effects of multiple out-of-home placements and long stays in foster care.

Concurrent Planning Is Culturally Competent

Concurrent planning can be an advantageous permanency planning method when used with African American families for several reasons:

- African Americans respect a social work method that simultaneously and immediately searches for kin when out-of-home placement becomes necessary, delivers services to troubled birth families, and assures children a safe and permanent home should reunification efforts fail.
- Starting at the first meeting, caseworkers tell birth parents about the possibility of reunification, relinquishment, or termination of parental rights in a straightforward manner.
- Concurrent planning programs often secure open adoption agreements between birth parents and adoptive parents in the event of a termination of parental rights. Open adoption agreements recognize the ongoing importance of birth parents and extended family in the lives of African American children.

III. THE SPECIAL ROLE OF PERMANENCY PLANNING PARENTS AND THEIR NEED FOR SUPPORT

Permanency planning parents are the foster parents of concurrent planning. Agencies that clearly identify permanency planning parents' roles assure greater stability for the child, improve foster parent retention, and help permanency planning parents to be more effective caregivers. Agency and social worker support helps these special foster families deal with the permanency planning roller coaster ride. Support reduces permanency planning parent burn-out and lessens the chance of placement disruptions.

Permanency Planning Parent Roles

When permanency planning parents understand their complex responsibilities, they are better able to handle the strain of this demanding position.

Primary Roles

- **Nurturer**: The permanency planning parent is taught and supported to nurture the foster child's attachment to them, and to nurture the child's connection to, and memory of, her birth parents.
- **Permanency Facilitator**: Permanency planning parents are taught that their main job is to facilitate the permanency plan. The plan may be reunification, guardianship,



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or adoption Permanency planning parents help foster children visit their birth parents.

- **Birth Parent Supporter:** Permanency planning parents get to know birth parents. They empathize with struggling birth parents, and model positive parenting skills. They communicate with birth parents about the child's day-to-day life. Depending on the needs of the child and the nature of the case, permanency planning parents may have more or less contact with birth parents.

Secondary Roles

- **Trainer:** Permanency planning parents help instruct prospective permanency planning families at pre-service trainings.
- **Parent Group Member:** Permanency planning parents empower one another at regular support group meetings.

Supporting Permanency Planning Parents

One of the key attributes of concurrent planning programs is the extra agency and social worker support afforded to permanency planning parents.

Agency Support

- Permanency planning agencies eliminate or reduce barriers between adoption and foster care units to serve children and families who have been identified as needing concurrent planning services. These special units combine recruiting, administrative, and supervision efforts, and assure permanency planning parents of one continuous worker throughout the course of the case.
- Concurrent planning agencies include permanency planning parents as members of the treatment team. Permanency planning parents participate in case reviews and permanency staffings.
- Concurrent planning agencies help African American permanency planning parents feel like members of the team by building in time for personal contact. Agencies recruit potential permanency planning parents from the neighborhoods where African American foster children originally lived.

Social Worker Support

- Permanency planning family social workers carry reduced caseloads (15 to 25 children) so that they may meet frequently with permanency planning families or talk with them often by phone.
- Social workers help permanency planning families struggle with feelings of potential loss of beloved foster children. They also provide permanency planning families with

extra support and referral services (such as grief counseling) when children are reunited with their birth parents.

- Social workers provide permanency planning parents with complete background information on the child prior to placement.

CONCLUSION

Concurrent planning will work best if it is implemented with its essential elements and sterling qualities intact. Besides fully supporting permanency planning parents and defining their role, concurrent planning agencies must deliver intensive, time-limited services to birth families, reduce caseload sizes, collaborate with juvenile courts, and provide training for all members of the permanency planning treatment team.

References

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