

PART III

Permanency for Children and Youth



The concept of permanency planning has served for more than three decades as the broad practice and legal umbrella for the provision of the continuum of child welfare services. This framework was initially legally mandated with the passage in 1980 of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (P.L. 96-272); almost fifteen years ago by the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA; P.L. 105-89); and, most recently, in 2008, by the Fostering Connection to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (P.L. 110-351). Building upon the knowledge derived from demonstration and research projects, permanency planning involves a mix of family-centered, child-focused, and culturally relevant philosophies, management and program components, and practice strategies designed to help children and youth live in families that offer a continuity of relationships with nurturing parents or caregivers and the opportunity to establish lifetime relationships.

Because it is widely acknowledged that separation, loss, and unresolved grief as well as the uncertain and often long-term nature of the foster care experience can have a very negative impact on children's overall sense of belonging, identity formation, and emotional well-being, the process and outcomes of permanency planning are intended to safely limit entry into placement and, failing that, to limit the time children and youth spend in care. Thus planning for children and youth's permanency as well as their safety and developmental well-being should begin when a child and the child's family first come in contact with the child welfare agency. From this initial contact, permanency efforts are supported by actively including families and children and/or youth in individualized case planning; by assuring that workers visit both the child and parents frequently; and by coordinating service delivery and competent decision making, including by legal entities, about where children and youth will grow up. Permanency planning requires that case-by-case assessments (which integrate a safety or risk assessment) and interventions balance the time needed for a

family to make necessary changes with a young person's need for continuity of relationships, secure attachments, and the ability to tolerate separation and loss.

In the federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) process, the permanency variables have been conceptualized in two broad areas:

Outcome Permanency 1: Children have permanency and stability in their living situations through

- decreasing foster care reentries;
- achieving the stability of foster care placement;
- establishing a permanency goal for the child;
- accomplishing reunification, guardianship, or permanent placement with relatives;
- adoption; or
- permanency goal of other planned permanent living arrangements.

Outcome Permanency 2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children through

- proximity of the child's foster care placement to the parents' home;
- placement with siblings also in care;
- frequent, regular visits with parents and siblings in foster care;
- preservation of connections;
- placement with a relative; and
- maintaining a relationship between the child in care and her parents and also between the child and siblings placed separately.

An array of permanency outcomes (each of these is discussed in this volume) is desirable for children and youth, with priority given to those that maintain the child's existing family and kin relationships and connections. Therefore, achieving permanency calls for initially attempting to keep children and youth at home

safely with their parents to prevent the trauma of unnecessary separation and placement and, failing that, placing children with relatives when possible and with other siblings entering care. These issues are fully explored in Hegar and Scannapieco's chapter on preservation of the extended family and kinship care and in Hegar's chapter exploring the importance of maintaining sibling connections.

For children and youth who cannot safely remain with their families and for whom placement in family foster care is therefore necessary, numerous issues must be considered. These are discussed in Freundlich's overview of family foster care and in Bullard, Gaughan, and Owens's examination of group care settings. For the majority of children and youth, family reunification (see Pine, Spath, and Gosteli's chapter) is the preferred permanency option. Parent-child visiting, at the heart of reunification, is explored by coeditor Peg Hess.

When children and youth cannot return home within the federally mandated time frame of twelve to fifteen months, alternative permanency options should be pursued, including adoption by relatives, foster parents, or a new family (coeditor Mallon explores these issues in his overview of the topic); customary adoption in Indian communities (see Cross's chapter); legal guardianship with relatives, foster parents, or another caring adult (see Testa and Miller's chapter); and, in special circumstances, another planned alternative living arrangement with relatives, foster parents (considered by Renne and coeditor Mallon), or a small community-based group or residential setting—each with attention to nurturing and preserving lifetime family connections.

Increasingly, child welfare practitioners understand that their work, even when reunification is not possible, must also involve birth families (see Hollingsworth's chapter on birthmothers whose parental rights are terminated). Practitioners must also consider the effects of permanency efforts that may not be positive (see Festinger's work on adoption disruption).

Wright and Freundlich review the salient issues concerning postpermanency services that support families in achieving continued permanence and stability.

Permanency planning balances the rights and needs of children, youth, and parents with the harm that can be brought by the passage of time and delays in decision making. While there is no one correct outcome for achieving permanency for all children and youth, the challenge is to arrive in a timely manner at the permanency outcome that offers the greatest measure of emotional and legal permanency for each child or youth. In a chapter focused on youth development by Mary Elizabeth Collins the unique circumstances of youth in foster care are considered.

As explored in depth in part 3, permanency planning involves a mix of family-centered casework and legal strategies designed to assure that children and youth have safe, caring, stable, and lifetime families in which to grow up. According to the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections at the Hunter College School of Social Work (2011), these strategies include the following:

- Targeted and appropriate efforts to protect safety, achieve permanence, and strengthen family and child well-being.
- Early intervention and prevention with reasonable efforts to prevent unnecessary out-of-home care when safety can be assured.
- Safety as a paramount concern throughout the life of the case with the identification of those aggravated circumstances in which reasonable efforts to preserve or reunify families may not be required.
- Appropriate least restrictive out-of-home placements within family, culture, and community, with comprehensive family and child assessments, written case plans, goal-oriented practice, and concurrent permanency plans required.
- Reasonable efforts to reunify families and maintain family connections and

continuity in children's relationships when safety can be assured.

- Reasonable efforts to find alternative permanency options when children can not return to their parents through adoption, legal guardianship, or, in special circumstances, another planned alternative permanent living arrangement outside the child welfare system.
- Filing of termination of parental rights petitions at fifteen months after placement when this action is in the best interests of the child and when exceptions do not apply.
- Collaborative case activity—partnerships between birth parents, foster parents, agency staff, court and legal staff, and community service providers.
- Frequent and quality parent-child visits as well as worker-child and worker-parent visits.
- Timely case reviews, permanency hearings, and decision making about where children will grow up, taking into account the child's sense of time.

Fulfilling the promise of permanency requires that children, youth, and family service practitioners are aware of the need to include the following elements in their practice:

- Family-centered and strengths and needs based practice
- Community-based service delivery
- Cultural competence and respect for diversity
- Open and inclusive practice
- Nonadversarial approaches to problem solving and service delivery
- Concurrent rather than sequential consideration of all permanency options

The chapters in this section address a broad range of issues. Further, since the chapters are written by academics, practitioners, and others with a wide range of experiences in the field, the reader will also find diverse opinions and perspectives concerning permanency planning and, in some cases, about child welfare in general.

REFERENCES

National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections at the Hunter College School of Social

Work (2011). *Web-based toolkit on concurrent permanency planning*. New York: National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections.