

**EFFECTIVE, COORDINATED PERMANENCY PLANNING IS CRUCIAL TO
POSITIVE OUTCOMES**

Gail Aitken

November 2015

“Someday I’ll go to a forever home too –right?”

M. age 3, in his 3rd placement.

To thrive, all children and youth require a sense of belonging and attachment to one or more persons whom they regard as family. In current jargon they need a “forever family,” a person or persons they can count on to emotionally support them, even though they may, as they mature, not live with them. For children who are Crown wards in the care of the Province of Ontario, about 7000 of them, finding a “forever family” is often difficult to effect.

Many children who are Crown wards have had very troubled early years, with many moves, back and forth from family to society care, and into diverse placements. The province has stated that about 80% of children who are Crown wards are “special needs children.” The province has also indicated that the average age at which children become Crown wards is about eight and one-half years. We must improve the processes of permanency planning.

Permanency planning needs to begin before a child comes into temporary care. This would be assisted by devoting increased resources to family support services more consistently throughout the province to help families in crisis, and, potentially, to help prevent the need for the child to become a ward. Counselling and temporary financial support through crises need to be more available.

MORE SPECIALIZED FOSTER HOMES ARE REQUIRED

When a child comes into care strenuous efforts need to be made to find appropriate assessments and placements, particularly to increase the availability of specialized

foster homes equipped to help very troubled children. This requires excellent communication within and among children's aid societies about resources.

GREATER TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY ARE REQUIRED

The provincial reviews of Crown wards need to be more inclusive. Certainly greater transparency about conditions within the child welfare system is essential to improve comprehensive planning and opportunities for permanent placements for children for whom we are responsible. The people of this province need to know the circumstances in the child welfare services they support.

INCREASED COMMUNITY SUPPORTS ARE NEEDED

Placements with kin need to be reinforced by community agencies providing training, counselling and support. Placement with families and friends are frequently fraught with relationship problems, some of which can be circumvented.

COOPERATIVE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN WORKERS, FOSTER AND BIRTH FAMILIES NEED DEVELOPMENT

Since in many situations the objective is to reunite the child with the birth family, agency workers need to work with foster parents to assist them with the relationships with birth family members. Foster parents need greater access to groups helping them to support troubled foster children, and to relate as well as possible to birth family members.

OBSTRUCTIVE COURT DELAYS MUST BE PREVENTED

Since the earlier a child can be adopted the better, agency permanency planning processes need in many instances to be streamlined as do related court processes. Too frequently delays in court processes impede the process involved in achieving permanent placements for children. In some instances training programs for family court judges may be indicated.

EXTENSIVE POST-ADOPTION SUPPORTS ARE NEEDED

Frequently after an adoption is finalized, adoptive parents feel abandoned by the agencies. Many adoptive parents would benefit from extended post-adoption counselling programs, especially considering the nature of the troubled children for whom they are now responsible.

RESOURCES FOR SUBSIDIZED ADOPTIONS NEED TO BE INCREASED

Adoption subsidies should be made more available than they now usually are, as these are special needs children. Many families best suited to adopting troubled children are amongst those of fairly modest means who will not place excessive demands or have excessively high academic expectations of the children. Consideration should be given to increasing both the federal and provincial tax credit for adoptions especially considering the costs of both international and private adoptions which can be prohibitive.

FOSTER CARE SUPPORTS AND HELP WITH TUITION FOR POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION REQUIRES EXPANSION

Recently the Ontario government has wisely extended the age of Crown wards still in high school until the age of 21. As many of these young people are slower to develop than the average student due to the traumatic events of their lives, this extension is an excellent change to equip them to have access to good employment. In some instances we recommend that students successfully pursuing post-secondary education should be given support until age 25. A 2014 study by the Conference Board of Canada indicated that the return on the investment in education of these youths was more than repaid in reduced income security payments and correctional services costs due to the income taxes gained from successful employment and reduced dependency (Conference Board of Canada. Briefing. (2014, April). Investing in the Future of Canadian Children in Care.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN CARE HAVE RIGHTS

It is in the enlightened self-interest of society to make concerted efforts to improve comprehensive permanency planning processes for youth in care to avoid multi-generational cycles of dependency.