

Checklist for Assessing and Preparing for Openness in Child Welfare Planning

The following is a **Checklist to guide Mediators, Children's Lawyers, Family Lawyers** interviewing of parties involved in Openness – CAS workers, birth family members, prospective permanency parents (adoptive/kin). CAS workers may use this checklist as a guideline in preparing materials for case conferences and court hearings and in assessing prospective families in their ability to support the appropriate level of ongoing connections for the child.

This list is meant to address and help parties understand the clinical considerations including:

- whether openness is in the best interests of a specific child recognizing that best interests change as the child moves through developmental stages.
- the type of openness that may be appropriate for a child;
- education required for the child, birth family and adoptive family
- what supports may be required to ensure reasonable opportunity for successful planning for the child, birth and adoptive family.

Preliminary Considerations - ask the following questions about current contact a child/youth has

- Who does the child currently have contact with?
- Who else could or should be involved in an ongoing relationship with the child?
- What type of contact is currently happening – frequency, type, duration, supports required to facilitate connection?
- Are there issues concerning safety or the child's well-being?

Key information to know about the CHILD:

- Child's attachments/relationships- who/how many
- Child's developmental level
- Child's understanding of permanency and adoption
- Reason for initial and continued separation from birth family
- Child's emotional well-being and stability
- Other stresses the child is experiencing
- Child's views about ongoing contact with birth family

Key information to know about/from the BIRTH FAMILY:

- Reasons for permanency plan (abuse, neglect, mental health, parental disability)
- Safety issues that need to be acknowledged.
- Characteristics of relationship with child
- Birth family views about adoptive placement
- Previous experience with contact
- Ability to respect boundaries

- Stage of grieving and supports to help with resolution
- Ability to accept review, mediation and ongoing supports.

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Key Information to know about/from the ADOPTIVE/KINSHIP family:

(If family has not been selected, identify realistic/concrete factors that will be considered in selection)

- Views about ongoing contact and understanding of importance for a child
- Experience with accepting new people into extended family constellation
- Geographic proximity to birth family members
- Other demands on family time related to this child or other children in the home
- Attitudes toward birth family -empathy
- Adoptive parent's capacity to set healthy boundaries
- Ability to engage in open communication
- Cultural differences between birth family and adoptive family
- Ability of a system to provide family with support for review, assistance, and mediation.
- Parents' ability to accept support and be open to change.

Identify the factors that are likely to support success in openness planning?

- Do birth and permanency families seem to have a mutual concern for the child's well-being?
- Is there reason to believe that a friendship or personally satisfying relationship could develop between adults?
- Do adults have a reasonable ability to manage direct communication and respect boundaries?
- Can education and/or support be provided to adults (Birth/kin/foster & Adoption family) to develop a relationship that will prevent the further loss of birth family connection for the child?

Identify the factors that are most likely to be barriers to success in openness planning (and cannot be mitigated with supports). Such as:

- poor ability to manage boundaries that are set out
- lack of acceptance of "others"
- lack of external family support or understanding
- lack of community support or understanding
- geographical distance
- major differences in lifestyle, values

(This tool is available in a fillable pdf document – contact: patconvery@sympatico.ca)

Consider solutions that can be considered in planning that respect the needs and views of the child:

CAS workers, courts and mediators can help parents (adoptive/kin and birth family) to create the foundational structure for an ongoing contact plan for a child through agreements and court orders. They will benefit from having relevant information gathered, shared, and considered in the early stages of permanency planning and reviewed as appropriate through the transition of the child out of foster care to legal permanency with a family.

Ultimately, the success of any plan will be determined by the relationship and positive regard that develops between adoptive and birth family members over time, with the child as witness to this developing relationship and their sense of encouragement and normalcy from all family members, whether through biology or legality.

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