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# Preparing Children and Youth for Adoption or Other Family Permanency

Children leaving out-of-home care for adoption or other family permanency require preparation and support to help them understand the past events in their lives and to process feelings connected to their experiences of abuse and neglect, separation, loss, rejection, and abandonment. Child welfare, foster care, and adoption agencies often assume that permanent families will provide the healing environment for these children and youth, and these agencies spend considerable resources to recruit, train, and support foster and adoptive parents to provide legal permanency and well-being for these children. While a high percentage of these adoptions are successful—in that they are not legally

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dissolved—both children and families often struggle or suffer from stress that might have been mitigated by better preparation practices for all parties.

This bulletin discusses services for children and youth to address their readiness and preparation for permanent relationships. While adoption is not the first or preferred permanency goal for children and youth in foster care, this bulletin focuses on preparing those children whose goal is adoption; however, much of the information on preparation is also applicable to children and youth with other permanency goals. We look at what has previously been considered adequate preparation as well as current practices and those in development to more effectively ensure that children and youth are better prepared for permanent family relationships, including both legal and relational permanency (permanent relationships with caring adults).

#### REINSTATEMENT OF PARENTAL RIGHTS

Several States currently permit the reinstatement of parental rights after termination. These new laws were developed in response to the number of youth leaving foster care with no permanent family. To find out more, visit the webpage developed by the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections: [http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info\\_services/reinstatement-of-parental-rights.html](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/reinstatement-of-parental-rights.html)

## Evolution of Preparation for Permanency

From the time that children and youth are removed from family care, they face numerous emotional stressors as they adjust to their ever-changing status: for example, foster child, dependent child, former adopted person, delinquent, and various diagnostic labels, among others. They are challenged by new surroundings and must come to some level of understanding of what happened to them, as well as affirm their own identity and allow themselves to create new relationships and redefine existing ones without protective adult relationships to support and guide them.

Achieving permanency is not just an **outcome** for these children and youth; it is a **process**. Whatever their legal status may be, at all ages, they are most interested in the relational permanency that they can find, create, maintain, or develop in the safety of a parent child relationship. Ensuring that children and youth are ready for relational and/or legal permanency, in what has proven to them to be a world that offers little stability, is a critical step.

### Traditional Preparation Practices

No specific practice modality has been established across the child welfare delivery system to prepare children and youth for adoption. Rather, approaches to this work have been agency and individually based, with some similar components and services. Traditionally, services to prepare children and youth have focused on getting children ready for the adoptive family, helping them to understand the legal process, and obtaining

their consent for such a move—although the specifics of what this entailed could

vary widely (Hanna, 2007). This remains the practice in many agencies. Assessment of children’s readiness for a new permanent family generally focuses on their behavior in foster care, with input from social workers and mental health professionals. Decisions are based on the assumption that children will accept new homes and families once they understand that it is unsafe for them to live at home. Actual preparation activities may consist of several conversations with the child or youth to talk about the family who wants them and then to plan for the placement. The emphasis is on where the child is going, with limited mention of biological parents and possibly siblings.

Numerous States and private adoption and foster care programs use established curricula to provide content and materials to train and approve potential parents, generally in compliance with Federal and State policies.<sup>1</sup> In fact, much of the preparation work is done with the prospective family, who, after reviewing the background of the child, meeting him or her, and having preplacement visits, determines that they want the child and can manage the behaviors of the child. In cases where a child is already living with a foster family and becomes legally free for adoption by that family, the change in legal status often occurs with little preparation for either the family or the child regarding other aspects of permanency.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) brought about a number of changes in adoption:

- Elimination of long-term foster care as a permanency goal
- A shorter timeframe to termination of parental rights
- Change in emphasis in public agencies to a focus on time-specific goals to permanency, specifically, risk and safety assurances
- Shift in caseworker roles to case management functions
- More specialized work with children and youth, based on assessments and mental health treatment services

While the goal since ASFA has remained permanency for children and youth, service delivery has shifted toward a behavioral health perspective for treating the behaviors of children and youth. These behaviors are often viewed from a perspective of pathologies related to the trauma of abuse and neglect or the trauma that may have resulted from long-term foster care, group care, and impermanence in relationships. Thus, caseworkers and other important adults in the lives of children and youth may rely on therapists or behavioral specialists to prepare children for permanency. The focus often is on correcting behavior—to the exclusion of helping the child heal past hurts, resolve issues with past relationships, and prepare for relational permanency with the birth family, relatives, or adoptive parents.

Only a few models of preparation of children and youth have been developed. Hanna (2005) outlined the evolution of these models in the following table (used with permission from M. D. Hanna’s 2005 Ph.D. dissertation, *Preparing School Age Children for Special*

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1

Needs Adoption: Perspectives of Successful  
Adoptive Parents and Caseworkers,  
University of Texas at Austin):

Summary of Models of Child Preparation for Adoption	
Author	Model's Key Components
Chestang & Heymann (1976)	<p>Consider child's relationship to biological parents</p> <p>Help child to understand they are not in foster care because they were "bad"</p> <p>Do not vilify biological parents</p> <p>Relieve child of guilt for placement</p> <p>Assure child of his or her right to caring and nurturing parents</p> <p>Help child understand foster care is temporary and adoption is permanent</p> <p>Worker should have consistent contact with the child – at least once a week</p> <p>Worker should explore type of family the child wants and seriously consider the child's wishes</p> <p>Child's participation may vary with age</p>
Jones (1979)	<p>Four stage process –</p> <p>Help child to understand legal termination of parental rights</p> <p>Help child understand difference between foster care and adoption</p> <p>Completion of the life story book</p> <p>Preplacement visits with adoptive family</p>
Kagan (1980)	<p>Strategic therapy approach to be used after adoptive placement prior to finalization. Assumes child is resistant to placement and has problem behaviors.</p> <p>Child has five tasks to resolve to successfully adjust to placement:</p> <p>Adjustment to current placement; learning the rules, expectations, roles, and norms</p> <p>Grieving the loss of parents and other significant individuals</p> <p>Expressing feelings of anger, fear, and sadness, preferably to new parents</p> <p>Developing a positive identity and self-image separate from previous parental figures</p> <p>Reattaching and forming primary bonds with the new adoptive parents</p>
McInturf (1986)	<p>Five-stage process using the lifebook as the primary tool of preparation.</p> <p>The facts</p> <p>The whys</p> <p>The feelings</p> <p>The goodbyes</p> <p>The plan for the future</p>

Author	Model's Key Components
Fahlberg (1991)	<p>Identifies 14 tasks to be accomplished in transitioning child from foster care to adoption:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introduce adoption to the child</li> <li>Arrange first meetings</li> <li>Provide “homework” for child and family</li> <li>Share information</li> <li>Get commitment to proceed</li> <li>Plan subsequent preplacement visits</li> <li>Discuss name changes</li> <li>Initiate the grief process</li> <li>Discuss the “worst of the worst”</li> <li>Obtain permission for the child to go and do well</li> <li>Facilitate goodbyes with foster family and other people important to the child</li> <li>Provide ideas for welcoming ritual</li> <li>Facilitate postplacement contacts</li> <li>Arrange postplacement follow-up</li> </ul>
Henry (2005)	<p>The 3-5-7 Model – Three-step model with focus on involving the child in the process.</p> <p>Step 1 – Help child integrate past and present</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clarification of past and life events</li> <li>Integration of all family roles and memberships</li> <li>Actualization of being a member of the new family</li> </ul> <p>Step 2 – Help child answer five questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What happened to me?</li> <li>Who am I?</li> <li>Where am I going?</li> <li>How will I get there?</li> <li>When will I know I belong?</li> </ul> <p>Step 3 – Critical elements of involving the child in the adoption process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engage the child in the process</li> <li>Listen to the child’s words</li> <li>When you speak, tell the truth</li> <li>Validate the child and the child’s life story</li> <li>Create a safe space for the child as they do this work</li> <li>It is never too late to go back in time</li> <li>Pain is part of the process</li> </ul>

Where the Field Is Going

There is a growing recognition of the need to develop better practice models that guide children and youth toward permanency in

relationships and connections. In response, many public and private foster care and adoption agencies, residential treatment facilities, and therapeutic treatment agencies have begun to offer adoption and permanency services for children focused on issues related to the trauma caused by abuse and neglect. These services often provide excellent support for children but may be fragmented when it comes to addressing all of the relationships within the child's social network. Better preparation addresses all of the relationships—past and present—in children's lives, supports their grieving, and helps them identify new permanency sources. The type of support that children need for this work is not exclusive to therapists but can and should also be provided by other important adults in their lives. Agencies must develop and cultivate the skill and understanding needed by birth, foster, and prospective adoptive families to do this important work.

## Promising Practices for Preparing Children and Youth for Permanency

Working with children and youth to guide them toward permanency in relationships should include both steps to address past traumas of loss and abuse and opportunities to give meaning to existing and future relationships.

### [Addressing Past Experiences in Preparation for Permanency](#)

Those working with children and youth who have been in out-of-home care and are

preparing for permanency need a basic understanding of the child's point of view, including these common experiences:

**Loss and grief.** Children and youth who are placed in the child welfare system often have a long history of losses and unresolved grief. They may have losses directly related to the circumstances that brought them into care (abuse, neglect), and they may experience additional losses when they are removed from their family and caregivers. Each move can bring more losses of friends, siblings, supportive adults, classmates, pets, familiar surroundings, and more.

**Confusion and anger.** Many children are left to wonder what really happened that brought them into care, why their families may not be able to continue caring for them, and who will be there to take care of them and protect them. A child may experience anger, sadness, and even depression. Many children struggle with their changed role within the family system or sibling status when they are removed from their birth family. Unresolved grief, effects of feeling unwanted and unloved, and confusion about who they are and where they will live have been shown to lead to behavioral issues, psychological confusion, emotional stress, and difficulty in forming new relationships.

**Divided loyalties.** Many children, particularly adolescents, have conflicting feelings about being a permanent member of a new family. These children may have difficulty with their sense of identity, may lose connections to immediate and extended family, and may have very little information about their own personal history.

Caseworkers who understand the child's experiences from the child's point of view will be better able to help the child or youth address past issues and explore the possibilities of new relationships.

## Foundational Principles of Preparation

A number of foundational principles can help agencies shape an overall approach to support and guide children and youth as they identify and establish permanent relationships:

- All children and youth deserve relational permanency.
- Just as adoptive parents and guardians need preparation for the new relationships they are entering, so do children and youth.
- Readiness practices are needed regardless of the permanency goal or outcome.
- Permanency is a *process* for a child, not just an outcome. It starts with birth family relationships and continues with reunification, adoption, or other permanent familial relationships. Establishing or maintaining connections to the birth family or important people from a child's past may help to mitigate loyalty issues, whatever the permanency outcome.
- Permanency work with children requires time, consistency, and honesty from social workers.
- Work with children and youth should not be considered only in the context of therapy. Although behavioral health services may be appropriate for any individual child, engaging the child in activities, tasks, and conversations to prepare him or her for permanency can be the work of caseworkers, caregivers, social workers, family members, court personnel, and others. In some cases, birth parents or other birth relatives may be able to help the permanency process by giving their children "permission" to move on to a new family.
- Work with children and youth is a process that begins before placement and can extend past final adoption. (Unfortunately, many efforts do not start until the child has been freed for adoption when termination of parental rights

has occurred, and many agencies provide only limited supports and services after adoption finalization.)

Engaging children and youth in readiness activities must be developmentally appropriate. The cognitive and emotional abilities of the child or youth must determine the types of activities (e.g., lifebooks) and resources used in permanency preparation work.

Permanency planning (the legal process) is distinct from permanency preparation work (the relational process). Children and youth can be empowered by their participation in the planning process, including their involvement in recruitment and family finding activities. Although these activities may engage them in some of the emotional tasks of preparing for permanency, a more comprehensive preparation program may help them explore their feelings about life events and support their readiness for permanency.

The work of the child or youth is to grieve old relationships in order to move toward new ones. The work of the caseworker and other adults is to prepare and support the child through the entire process.

Agency policies and caseworker practices that take a holistic view of permanency preparation work, considering it from the perspective of the child and encompassing the resolution of past issues and readiness for new relationships, will be better able to help children and youth bring their own meaning to permanency.

## Permanency Preparation Practices

Most models of child preparation follow three basic stages (Hanna, 2007), and these general steps provide a good organizational structure and sequence for agencies and caseworkers responsible for preparing children and youth.

- Help the child to understand the facts of his or her removal.

2. Help the child explore feelings of loss, anger, and confusion.
3. Empower the child to be part of the plans for the future.

Henry's (2005) 3-5-7 Model® takes the three step process even further by specifying three tasks, five questions, and seven skill elements. The model offers a guided approach for workers and other adults helping children and youth explore and understand permanency in relationships. It focuses on the tasks of (1) clarification of life events, (2) integration of the experiences and meanings of relationships in different families, and (3) actualization of memberships in their identified network of families. The child or youth works on these tasks by exploring five conceptual questions, each of which addresses a specific issue. A 2011 article (Henry & Manning) suggests activities to support the child's work with the three tasks and issues related to the five questions.

1. What happened to me? (Issue: loss) (activity: create a loss line<sup>2</sup>)
2. Who am I? (Issue: identity) (activity: make a life map or life path<sup>3</sup>)
3. Where am I going? (Issue: attachment) (Activity: review pictures and memories)
4. How will I get there? (Issue: relationships)

<sup>2</sup> A loss line is a timeline of losses that the child or youth can document. See, for example, p. 36 in AdoptUSKids' *Lasting Impressions: A Guide for Photolisting Children*, available at <http://adoptuskids.org/assets/files/NRCRRFAP/resources/lasting-impressions.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> This activity involves stepping stones (e.g., sticky notes) in a path that represent major life events for the child (see Fahlberg, 1991, p. 363).

(Activity: create a collage)

When will I know I belong? (Issue: claiming/safety) (activity: take a family photo together)

Creating a lifebook is essential to this work. Lifebooks help children remember and maintain connections from their past as well as integrate their past experiences into their current lives. Permanency/adoption practice models agree that children and youth need to process loss and grieve the losses related to their removal from birth families to help them develop healthy attachments to new adoptive families and permanent connections. At least one State (North Carolina) requires foster parents to be trained in making lifebooks before they can be licensed (Lifebooks, 2013). A number of resources exist to help workers, biological family members, foster and adoptive parents, and other important adults work with children and youth on creating and maintaining this record of their lives (see, for example, <https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postplacement/lifebooks.cfm>).

The final component of Henry's 3-5-7 Model®, the seven skill elements, may vary slightly according to the age of the child. The elements identify the necessary philosophies and skills of those working with children and youth. Henry and Manning (2011) note that the seven elements are just a few of the many skills that adults need as they support youth through their grieving and preparing for new relationships:

- Use engagement activities that encourage expression of feelings and thoughts about life experiences.
- Create a safe space for expressing feelings.
- Recognize that behaviors are based in pain and trauma.
- Respond briefly to the child or youth's comments in order to provide space to grieve.

5. Listen.
6. Affirm their stories.
7. Be present as they do the work of grieving.

While the guided approach outlined by the 3-5-7 Model® can be woven into other child welfare practices, the application of the concepts requires training, leadership, and effective communication skills. It also requires a time commitment by the caseworker so that the child or youth has continuity throughout the process. The worker and youth should meet at least once every 2 weeks, with interim phone calls (Henry & Manning, 2011).

In a recent guide to help agencies find families for older children, AdoptUSKids provides a number of strategies that workers can use with older youth who may present barriers to adoption (AdoptUSKids, 2012; see <http://adoptuskids.org/assets/files/NRCRRFAP/resources/going-beyond-recruitment-for14-to-16-year-olds.pdf>). Youth's common concerns as listed in the guide include:

- Not understanding what adoption means
- Not believing that anyone would want to adopt them
- A worry that adoption would prevent them from ever having any contact with their birth family, including siblings
- Feelings of disloyalty to their birth family
- Worry about changing their name
- Worry about moving far away

The guide outlines a number of strategies to counter these concerns, most of which revolve around providing factual information in a candid and sensitive manner.

Youth engagement and empowerment is an important part of permanency preparation work, especially for older youth who may have experienced greater disappointments and have

more reluctance to seek out a new family. In one study, the Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK) program interviewed 74 youth about strategies that workers had used to help the youth overcome their lack of hope and their distrust about achieving permanency (Ellis, 2011). Youth identified the following worker strategies as successful:

Emphasize the advantages of adoption

Seek relatives and other connections to adopt

Be open and honest about the adoption process and possible outcomes

Empower youth throughout the adoption process

Address questions and concerns

Build a relationship with the youth

## Promising Programs

Many child welfare agencies recognize that children and youth in care need opportunities that will prepare them for permanency. The following list spotlights jurisdictions that have incorporated a significant preparation component for children—not just families—into their permanency efforts.

### Description of Programs

#### • The National Institute for Permanent Family Connectedness (NIPFC)

(<http://www.familyfinding.org/>), at Seneca Family of Agencies, Oakland, CA, provides comprehensive, collaborative partnerships with child welfare agencies throughout the nation to build capacity to find and engage families that can become permanency resources for youth living away from their birth families. Instruction

is available to families to encourage their attention to loss and grief work with youth. Specialized training is provided on the Family Finding model, developed by Kevin Campbell. The technique of Mobility Mapping is used to identify connectedness of relationships, and information on families is collected through a discovery phase. These components are then coordinated for youth in a Blended Perspectives meeting with family members interested in building relationships with youth. Lifetime support networks are developed to secure permanency for youth. NIPFC provides training, coaching, and technical assistance to many State and regional programs, in addition to Federal grant programs. A Facilitator's Guide is available to deliver a curriculum for the implementation and integration of the process of Family Finding.

## 2. **Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK)**

(<http://www.davethomasfoundation.org/what-we-do/wendys-wonderfulkids>), at the Dave Thomas Foundation, has established an effective program for the recruitment of adoptive families wherein recruiters practice child-focused recruitment. Their strategy is to focus exhaustively on an individual child's history, experiences, and needs in order to find an appropriate adoptive family. Child preparation teams consist of child welfare caseworkers, adoption workers, and therapists. Elements for the preparation of children are identified and, generally, provided through individual workers who engage in monthly contact with children. Determinations of preparedness for adoption and whether the child has needs that should be addressed before moving toward the adoption process are the objective of these activities. An evaluation study of outcomes over 5 years at 21 grantee agencies showed that children served by WWK were 1.7 times more likely than children not receiving WWK services to be adopted (Child Trends, 2011). The program currently has more than 100 recruiters in all 50 States and Canada.

- **Extreme Recruitment** is a program of the Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition of St. Louis, MO (<http://www.foster-adopt.org/carleen-goddard-mazur-training-institute/extreme-recruitment/>). Funded by the Children's Bureau, Extreme Recruitment is a 4-year trial that models the practice of diligent recruitment to reconnect youth (10 to 18 years) to kin through child-specific recruitment, intensive family-finding, and support services. The preparation component involves examining the youth's life for factors that impact readiness for permanency and addressing mental behavioral and physical health needs, peer and adult relationships, and educational needs. Preparing resource parents for permanency is also included.
- With a focus on the concurrent preparation of both children and their prospective adoptive families, **Family Focus Adoption Services** of Queens, NY, promotes a carefully paced transition phase in adoption placement (<http://familyfocusadoption.org/adoptionguides.html>). The agency believes that much of the preparation work is best done by the children themselves, at their own pace and to their own level of satisfaction. Adult protection is provided throughout the process and is intended to help build children's self-confidence. A trained and well-supervised adult guides each child from placement through the child's decision about adoption. Using a graduated visiting schedule and taking the child through a series of adoption levels that are marked by six cards collected by the child over 5 months, children can become more and more certain that being adopted by the particular family they are with is the right decision for them.
- **Robert G. Lewis**, of Wooster, MA, trains and supports agencies and States in preparing youth for permanency in a program called Family Bound (<http://www.rglewis.com/RGLewis%20Site/index.html>). His curriculum, *Family Bound Program: A Toolkit for Preparing Teens for Permanent Family Connections*, provides the

philosophy and activities to engage youth in this work. Youth attend group or individual sessions to discuss nine topics (e.g., the Real Truth About Families, Loss Is a Part of Living, etc.). It is a therapeutic, educational process that teaches concrete skills and provides teens with the opportunity to open up avenues for personal growth through healing relationships. The lessons are reinforced by opportunities to practice on family weekend visits. Currently, he has created a video project for use with teens to tell their stories about their lives, hopes, and dreams to explore meanings of potential permanent relationships.

6. A number of jurisdictions use the **3-5-7 Model**® to support permanency work for children and youth, including California, Delaware, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin (Henry & Manning, 2011). As described above, the 3-5-7 Model® provides a guided approach to help children, youth, and families do their work of grieving losses and rebuilding relationships, working toward the goals of well-being, safety, and permanency. The model is a strengths-based approach that empowers children and youth to engage in grieving and integrating significant relationships. In several programs, the model is woven into family-finding activities and Family Group Decision Making conferences. Practice applications are made both at intake and throughout ongoing case management services, including protective and placement services that can also support kinship, foster, and adoptive family placements. The 3-5-7 Model® provides tools (e.g., lifebooks, loss history chart) to support work around issues of separation and loss, identity formation, attachment, and building relationships, and it also supports deeper therapeutic work around abuse, abandonment, and neglect experiences.

### Tools and Resources

There are a number of tools that workers may find useful in their permanency work with children and youth.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation developed a *Permanency Case Planning Tool* to help caseworkers and supervisors working on permanency cases understand the case factors that are potential barriers and/or facilitators to permanency teaming and outcomes.

<http://www.aecf.org/KnowledgeCenter/Publications.aspx?pubguid={28123D47-0363-46B4A592-974FCCB07FA7}>

The Children's Bureau's National Resource Center on Adoption (NRCA) provides consultation and technical assistance to States to enhance their capacity to provide services to ensure that all children and youth have permanent families. The NRCA developed an *Adoption Competency Curriculum* that includes seven modules, one of which is *Child/Youth Assessment and Preparation*. The NRCA offers training to States on the curriculum; also, the handouts for the child/youth assessment and preparation include a number of tools, worksheets, and recommendations and are available online. <http://www.nrcadoption.org/wp-content/uploads/TG-ChildAssessment-Preparation-4-111.pdf>

The Center for Adoption Support and Education offers a number of resources for children, teens, and adults, including book lists and other resources. The website offers information about the seven core issues in adoption that apply to all members of adoption circle: loss, rejection, guilt/shame, grief, identity, intimacy & relationships, and control/gains.

<http://www.adoptionssupport.org/res/index.php>

Wisconsin's Coalition for Children, Youth & Families has produced *Touchpoints: Preparing Children for Transitions* to help caseworkers prepare children. The guide breaks down key discussion times, points to discuss, and who should be involved and provides helpful materials to use for each step (books, videos, guides, and activities).

<http://wiadopt.org/ToolsforWorkers/TouchpointsTool.aspx>

- The Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare at the University of Minnesota, in partnership with Anu Family Services, developed the Youth Connections Scale to help child welfare agencies better work with youth to strengthen and build relationships. The scale measures the strength of relationships between youth and adults:  
<http://www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/cascw/attributes/PDF/YCS/YCSImplementation.pdf>

The Children's Bureau has funded several grant clusters that focus, in whole or in part, on improving permanency outcomes:

- Diligent Recruitment of Families for Children in Foster Care: <http://www.adoptuskids.org/about-us/diligent-recruitment-grantees>
- Permanency Innovations Initiative: <https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/index.cfm?event=website.viewArticles&issueid=123&sectionid=19&articleid=3087>
- Family Connection Grants: <http://www.nrcpfc.org/grantees.html>
- Youth Permanency Cluster: <http://www.nrcadoption.org/resources/ypc/home/>

## Conclusion

Helping children, youth, and families served within the child welfare system to prepare for permanent relationships offers greater opportunities for their improved well-being. Children and families often have both the strength and resilience to overcome hurtful life experiences and move toward resolution of past losses. Models of intervention that establish these practices are beginning to

demonstrate a practical and viable method to support successful outcomes with families.

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**Using Family Group Conferencing to prepare children for placement, for moves in care, and continuing contact with their original families** - by Sally Palmer

**Introduction to Family Group Conferencing (FGC)**

FGC originated in New Zealand to address the over-representation of Indigenous children in foster care and jail. It is now included in Ontario's Child, Youth and Family Services Act. It is designed, in part, to address the power imbalance between family groups and child welfare agencies.

The family group refers to the child and their 'extended family group' as defined by the family group themselves. It includes people important in the child's life such as extended original family members, supportive people (neighbour, teacher), and prospective or current caregivers, if these are not part of the extended original family.

Leadership in the FGC is shifted from child welfare professionals to the family group which includes extended family, supportive people, caregivers, and the child. Structure is provided by a coordinator who is trained in leading FGCs.

The coordinator is expected by all participants to be impartial and holds no child welfare authority over the plan that the FGC develops. The coordinator prepares all participants prior to the conference, chairs the first session of the meeting, and organizes a leader from the family group for the second session. This is the private time in which the family group develops a plan for the child's care and brings their plan back to the total group. During private time, the family group works toward a decision about: keeping the child at home; initial placement; a move within care; access to family members; return home; and possible supports to the original family or caregivers. They also seek offers of support from members of the family group to ensure that the plan will be successful. When the family group has formed a plan for the child, they meet again with the coordinator and others from the initial session to tell them about the decisions they have reached in the private family time to address the reasons the child welfare agency is involved. At this point, child welfare professionals may question the plan and suggest modifications.

The third/final session is when the final decision is made by all participants, either to accept the family group's plan or modify it to meet the agency's concerns. Following this, the coordinator records and distributes the plan developed during the conference to all participants.

The role of child welfare professionals is to provide information to the family group about why the agency is involved and to invite the family group to develop a plan to address the safety concerns. During the final session, the child welfare professionals confirm that they accept the plan developed in the meeting as addressing the initial concerns and agree to implement the plan.

**Stages of supporting child's involvement in FGC**

The coordinator prepares the child for FGC by explaining the reason and process for the conference: asking the child what they want their family to know and how they would like to share this during the conference. If the child would like assistance in putting their thoughts together, the coordinator and the child decide who is the best person to help them.

The coordinator prepares a support person from the child's own network to focus on the child during the conference if the child agrees to have a support person present. The support person helps the child to express their thoughts and feelings, ensures a respectful reception for the child's input; and can move a young child to another room when needed. The coordinator provides a flexible location for the conference, as well as childcare when needed, so the child can move in or out as needed.

The coordinator role is complete after putting the Plan into final form and distributing it to all participants who were present at the conference. The child welfare worker is responsible for implementing the plan which includes regularly reviewing it with the family group to ensure it is current, relevant, and achievable. The group can reconvene for a follow-up FGC when the plan needs revisions.

#### Potential benefits of FGC to children and families....

##### ***...In Finding Permanency and Exploring Openness***

An FGC at decision making time can bring together those who are involved in a child's life so all can contribute to finding a permanent plan for the child.

The experience of having all these people involved in the conference demonstrates to the child that all participants are concerned about them and want to support them.

It is valuable for the child to be present when decisions are being made by those who care about them, and to have the opportunity to participate actively in these decisions.

It is important that the family group has some input into plans for the care of the child. They are more likely to cooperate with plans they have helped to make. Also, they have heard the concerns of the professionals in an open environment where the family has been given some leadership.

The FGC usually elicits offers of help to the child from extended family that would not have come forth without the time spent in the conference. Where parties cannot provide a secure permanent placement for a child, they might continue to provide stability and support to the child in other capacities.

An FGC could be held once permanency is found to discuss what openness might look like and how boundaries can be protected.