Permanent family placement for children unable to live with their birth families

Challenges and controversies

A symposium on permanency planning was held at the Australian Institute of Family Studies seventh national conference in Sydney in July 2000. The objective was to discuss the use of permanency planning as a framework for decision-making in child welfare. In particular, the symposium explored answers to questions such as: How much work should be undertaken to help birth families fulfil their parenting roles? At what point do you decide family support is unrealistic? How do you determine the likelihood of reunification? What are the crucial time limits for implementing case plans? What permanent placement arrangements involving termination of parental rights benefit children, birth parents and substitute parents? What are the disruption rates for permanent placements and how can stability be guaranteed?

Three of four papers prepared for the symposium are included here to recount the dilemmas and controversies involved in achieving the goal of long-term case planning in respect of children's future, with an introduction and response from the symposium discussant.

Introducing a symposium on permanency planning

Sarah Wise

Research Fellow, Australian Institute of Family Studies
300 Queen Street, Melbourne 3000
Email: sarahw@aifs.org.au

THE PERMANENCY PLANNING RATIONALE

There is ample evidence in the out-of-home care research literature that children who experience instability in care, either as the result of multiple placements during care, or because of unsuccessful, temporary returns to the care of the family, are more likely to experience poor psychological outcomes than children who receive stable and personalised care (Cashmore & Paxman 1996; Vorria, Rutter, Pickles, Wolkind & Hobsbaum 1998a, 1998b; Rutter 1995; Belsky & Cassidy 1994).

Attachment theory is used as a common explanation for this, which predicts children who suffer frequent loss or changes of caregiver, for whatever reason, experience anxiety and distress

associated with the 'loss' of their attachment figure. The physical or psychological unavailability of a caregiver at key times of distress means that the child's attachment behaviour (eg, extremes of dependent behaviour such as crying, clinging, seeking proximity) is unsuccessful in relieving upset and securing comfort and safety. As a consequence, emotional arousal mounts and remains unregulated. Further, when the experience of loss is repeated many times, the child is placed in a state of chronic insecurity and learns not to form attachment relationships in order to avoid the pain of losing them. Various forms of withdrawal and detachment represent attempts by children to protect themselves from the pain of loss or separation (Howe 1995a). This is

particularly likely to be the case if the child is unable to form a secure attachment to his or her biological parent(s), as disturbed attachment histories may lead to a compromised ability to form subsequent attachment relationships (Howe 1995b).

The distress experienced by children who suffer anxiety and insecurity about a caregiver's responsiveness places them at increased risk for a large number of negative developmental consequences. To be more specific, research has shown an absence of secure attachment relationships (eg, under conditions of severe caregiving neglect), separation from or loss of a caregiver or distortions in attachment relationships (eg, through abuse or neglect) lead to a disorganised insecure

pattern of attachment. Disorganised insecure attachment has been linked to a variety of adjustment difficulties and to psychopathy in both childhood and adolescence (Moss, St-Laurent, Rousseau, Parent, Gosselin & Saintonge 1999). Contrary to this, secure attachments are found to be protective against mental illness and difficulties in adjustment during periods of adversity (Bohlin, Hagekull & Rydell 2000; Farber & Egeland 1987) as well as to higher levels of overall competence.

In addition to the functional nature of attachment relationships, ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979) assumes that child development outcomes are affected by the stability of behaviours, experiences, attitudes and beliefs of the adult members in a child's primary care setting over time. If patterns of adult behaviour change (as the result of placement turnover or movement in and out of care, for example), particularly if these behaviours are inconsistent with a child's needs, or are of a large magnitude, adverse developmental change or maladaption may result (Powell 1989).

Thus, efforts to ensure children have the opportunity to form a continuous relationship with a consistent carer, either on the basis of returning to live with the family of origin or in an appropriate substitute arrangement, have become a serious preoccupation in child welfare practice today.

Permanency planning emphasises the urgency of providing separated children with a permanent family, and principles underlying the permanency planning approach have been established in a number of overseas and local jurisdictions as a means of ensuring children do not drift on in unplanned, protracted care situations. The concept of permanency planning embraces the idea of removing the child as soon as possible out of temporary substitute care and returning him or her to the birth family as the preferred alternative or to an adoption home as the second preference, or, if necessary, to another permanent alternative such as a family with legal guardianship.

Legislation in most States and Territories in Australia now gives support to the permanency planning goal of avoiding indefinite welfare drift, including common supporting principles such as avoidance of unnecessary disruption to the child's familiar environment and prompt and timely decision-making.

... efforts to ensure children have the opportunity to form a continuous relationship with a consistent carer ... have become a serious preoccupation in child welfare practice today.

Yet, while the principles of permanency planning are rooted in knowledge of child development, there are many controversies surrounding such an either/or approach to planning for children's lives and several practical obstacles to implementing such a system in practice. What priority do we place on family reunification over permanent care? How do we make long-term predictions about when parents will have sufficient capacity to adequately care for their children? How should the grounds for reunification be established and then verified? How do we define 'reasonable efforts' to unify families? What time-lines should be established for restoration work, and at what point do we decide that reunification efforts have failed? Can we ensure availability of permanent placement options? What forms of services and interventions produce successful placement outcomes? These important issues need to be addressed before the principles of permanency planning can be achieved in practice.

A SYMPOSIUM ON PERMANENCY PLANNING

In an effort to explore the complexities surrounding permanency planning, a symposium was held at the Australian Institute of Family Studies seventh national conference in Sydney in July 2000. Tensions between the

developmental requirement for a continuous, secure attachment relationship and the right of parents to have custody and control of the children born to them, as well as other controversies and challenges inherent in implementing a system of permanency planning, were deliberated.

The symposium was addressed by: Howard Bath, Director of the Thomas Wright Institute in Canberra; Judy Cashmore, Honorary Research Associate at the Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales; Cas O'Neill, Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Social Work, University of Melbourne, who has had experience in the roles of support foster carer and permanent carer; and Diane Beamer, Member of Parliament for Mulgoa in New South Wales. The author was the symposium discussant. Overall, the symposium presented issues surrounding permanency planning from research, practice, policy and direct experience perspectives.

SUMMARY OF ADDRESSES TO THE PERMANENCY PLANNING SYMPOSIUM

Cas O'Neill addressed the symposium first. Although O'Neill regarded termination of parental rights as a most extreme form of state intervention, the importance of imposing time limits for implementing case plans as a way of providing greater security for children unable to live with their birth families was emphasised. However, O'Neill stressed that time-lines can be achieved in many ways, and that decisions to remove a child permanently from their family of origin should never involve terminating the right of the child to maintain a continuous relationship with his or her extended birth family. O'Neill used a case example from her own experience as a support foster carer, 'Jackie's story', to illustrate the impotence and despair often felt by families in the face of a large and powerful bureaucracy. O'Neill also questioned whether families are provided with the quantity and quality of services required to prevent the need for foster care or as a means of reuniting children in foster care with their parents. O'Neill stressed the need for greater availability of relevant family support services to reduce the

requirement for permanent alternative placements.

Howard Bath addressed the symposium second. His central point concerned the tension involved in any decision-making process in child welfare where competing rights and realities need to be juggled. Sometimes the principle of permanence loses out to other principles that drive practice. To illustrate this point, Bath looked at some of the fall-out from the implementation of the principles of de-institutionalisation and normalisation. Bath outlined how the exclusive emphasis on the use of foster care has created a situation where group care has virtually disappeared, and there is no longer a range of out-of-home care options available. According to Bath, private families are pressured to take on children with challenging and/or dangerous behaviours, often with damaging results for both children and carers. Bath also highlighted the fact that, for a number of children requiring accommodation and support services, home-based placements do not offer permanence, and suggested that creating a range of placement options would achieve greater stability for children unlikely to find permanence in a home-based situation. Bath also pointed out that a number of other current practices based on accepted principles can actually work against the goal of permanency for some children. He then highlighted the tensions that are sometimes encountered when the provision of permanent families for separated children (based on their right of permanence) might conflict with the reality of a child's sense of identity.

Judy Cashmore spoke next. Cashmore provided a review of research related to factors affecting psychosocial outcomes and placement stability in out-of-home care. Severity and duration of abuse and neglect, age at placement, time in care

and number of earlier moves, children's emotional and behavioural problems, presence of other children (eg, siblings or other foster children) and carer's age, commitment and resources were reported as correlates of child outcomes and placement stability in both foster care and adoption placements. In contrast, contact with biological family was not found to have an adverse affect on either stability or psychosocial outcomes. This review reinforced Bath's position on the need for a variety of placement options for children, as even adoption placements are vulnerable to breakdown, and may not serve the needs of all children equally well. Cashmore concluded by stating that while permanent placements may have some benefits over foster care placements (eg, less stigma/agency involvement, family support beyond the age of 18 and a greater pool of carers), permanency planning does not, of itself, provide assurance of either stability or optimum development, and may have the unintended consequence of becoming case insensitive. Cashmore argued that carers in a range of placement options need far greater support if the best interests of all children are to be adequately met.

Diane Beamer addressed the symposium last. Beamer's presentation provided an overview of the NSW Hendrith Bill: a draft exposure Bill proposing radical changes to child welfare legislation aimed at freeing up separated children for adoption. Beamer argued that the need for legislative change could be understood in light of current issues in substitute care, in particular the tenacity of certain problems affecting parents' capacity to adequately care for their children such as mental illness and problem alcohol and drug use, and the subsequent damage to children due to protracted and often unsuccessful attempts to bring about change within the birth family.

REFERENCES

Belsky, J. & Cassidy, J. (1994) 'Attachment: theory and evidence'. In M. Rutter & D. Hay (Eds.), Development Through Life: A Handbook for Clinicians, Blackwell Scientific Publications, Oxford.

Bohlin, G., Hagekull, B. & Rydell, A. (2000) 'Attachment and social functioning: A longitudinal study from infancy to middle childhood', Social Development, vol 9(1), pp. 24-39.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) Ecological Systems Theory. The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.

Cashmore, J. & Paxman, M. (1996) Longitudinal Study of Wards Leaving Care, Report of Research Commissioned by the NSW Department of Community Services, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales.

Farber, E. & Egeland, B. (1987) 'Invulnerability among abused and neglected children', in E.J. Anthony & B.J. Cohler (eds.), The invulnerable child, The Guildford Press, New York.

Howe, D. (1995a) Attachment Theory for Social Work Practice, Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Howe, D. (1995b) 'Adoption and attachment', Adoption & Fostering, vol. 19, pp. 7-15.

Moss, E., St-Laurent, D., Rousseau, D., Parent, S., Gosselin, C. & Saintonge, J. (1999) 'School-aged attachment and the development of behavioral problems', Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science, vol 31(2), pp. 107-118.

Powell, D. (1989) 'Families and early childhood programs', Research Monographs of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, vol. 3. NAEYC no. 142.

Rutter, M. (1995) 'Maternal deprivation', in M. Bornstein (Ed.), Handbook of Parenting, Vol. 4. Applied and Practical Parenting. Part 1: Applied Issues in Parenting, Erlbaum, Hillsdale, NJ.

Vorria, P., Rutter, M., Pickles, A., Wolkind, S. & Hobsbaum, A. (1998a) 'A comparative study of Greek children in long-term residential group care and in two-parent families: I. Social, emotional and behavioural differences', Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, vol. 39.

Vorria, P., Rutter, M., Pickles, A., Wolkind, S. & Hobsbaum, A. (1998b) 'A comparative study of Greek children in long-term residential group care and in two-parent families: II. Possible mediating mechanisms', Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, vol. 39.