

BOOK REVIEW

The role of concurrent planning: Making permanent placements for young children

Elizabeth Monck, Jill Reynolds and Valerie Wigfall

British Association for Adoption and Fostering, London, 2003

The relationship between adoption and fostering in Australia has never been static, with regular generational changes precipitated by the numbers of children needing alternative family care, as well as community beliefs on the desirability or otherwise of foster care, adoption and other kinds of care. There have also at times been marked differences between states.

I was a young social worker in Victoria in the 1970s when the prevailing view (in the adoption field) was that foster parents who adopted the children in their care had somehow come to adoption through a 'back door', which allowed them to by-pass the official professional selection process for adoption. There was a sense that this was unfair in that it allowed these parents to 'jump the queue' for desirable children – that is, healthy infants or toddlers, who were in short supply.

This attitude was in contrast to the situation some decades earlier, when many children were readily available for adoption and authorities were pleased when foster parents sought to adopt children in their care. The beliefs of the 1970s have now moved on. Since the late 1980s, foster parents have once again been encouraged to become permanent parents to long term foster children in their care, through adoption or (in Victoria) permanent care.

The Role of Concurrent Planning: Making permanent placements for young children reports on a movement in the UK in which foster care, reunification with birth parents and adoption are considered as part of the same continuum of care, rather than discrete kinds of care. Concurrent planning was originally developed in the USA to target placement delay and placement drift for children in care. The first concurrent planning projects in England began in the mid 1990s.

Lutheran Social Services (based in Seattle, USA) developed the term 'concurrent planning' to describe an approach to permanence which works on supporting birth parents so that the child can return home from foster care, while at the same time preparing the foster parents for a possible adoption. The approach requires early case planning; intensive services to birth parents; written contracts which detail expectations of birth parents (including tight time limits for change); supervision of frequent access between birth parents and

their children; and small caseloads for workers (Katz, 1990). Decisions to reunify children with their birth families are based 'not on the original abuse and neglect, but on the parents' response to the services provided' (Katz et al, 1994a, cited in Monck et al, 2003).

This book details an evaluation in the UK which compared three concurrent planning programs with two 'traditional' placement programs (offering sequential placement options, eg, foster care > return home > foster care > permanent placement).

The hypotheses of the evaluation were that:

- concurrent planning would lead to permanent placement more quickly, and with fewer moves between care-giving families, than the traditional process leading to adoption;
- children placed through concurrent planning programs would have fewer developmental and behavioural difficulties than their peers placed through the traditional process;
- birth parents involved in concurrent planning would have a relatively positive view of the process leading to their child's placement.

The evaluation findings confirmed all of these hypotheses, although the writers point out that the children who were *not* part of a concurrent program were likely to have had more troubled backgrounds (which would have precluded any possibility of their return home through concurrent planning), and therefore more behavioural difficulties, than their peers. Other interesting findings which emerged from the study include:

- Interviews with both the birth and caregiving families indicated that 'the concurrent planning approach was clearly stressful for most of the adults', although 'nearly all the adults also recognised the value of the approach for the welfare of the child' (p. 255). Comparing their material resources unfavourably with the caregiving family, birth parents sometimes struggled to understand that the return of their child was a real possibility; while caregiving parents were often anxious about becoming too attached to a child who could well return home.

- Concurrent planning does not necessarily eliminate all placement drift and delays, as there tend to be multiple organisations involved with each child.

There do not appear to be any concurrent planning programs in Australia at present, although I am aware that there is some interest in state welfare departments in exploring this option. If such programs are set up, then the relationship between foster care and adoption in Australia will once again have changed.

This clearly written book has two major strengths. Firstly, the in-depth exploration of concurrent planning is of considerable interest to the child welfare field in Australia. Secondly, the evaluation itself has been comprehensively reported and is therefore a good example of how such an evaluation or research project can be presented. It has considerable detail on: why and how the study was undertaken; the findings (illustrated with the words of the participants); and a thorough discussion of various explanations for these findings.

The Role of Concurrent Planning is recommended on both these grounds.

Reviewed by:

Dr Cas O'Neill
Research Fellow
School of Social Work
University of Melbourne

REFERENCES

Katz, L. (1990), 'Effective permanency planning for children in foster care', *Social Work*, 35 (3), pp. 220-26.

AVAILABLE FROM:

British Association for Adoption and Fostering
Tel: (0011 44) 207 593 2072 Fax: 207 593 2001
Email: mail@baaf.org.uk
Books can be ordered through the BAAF website:
www.baaf.org.uk