

# One Door

## A unified approach for caregivers

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*New Zealand currently operates separate doors and different entry pathways for people wishing to adopt, foster or offer permanent care for a child. This presentation outlines the work now underway to develop a unified application, preparation, assessment, training and support system for applicants wishing to care for a child, whether by adoption, guardianship or as a transitional (foster) caregiver. Placing the child at the centre, One Door uses a framework comprised of six core attributes for parenting a child not born to you; safety; attachment; resilience; identity; integrity; and support. A challenge for the One Door design team will be the application of the model to the family/whānau caregiver whose entry into the care system is, in the main, through necessity not desire.*

'One Door' is a vision of a unified application, preparation, assessment, training and support system for applicants wishing to care for a child, whether by adoption, guardianship or as a transitional caregiver. At its foundation is the driver that children in need of care should have access to as wide a pool of appropriate families as is possible. A One Door approach recognises that limiting preparation and training of applicants to one legal mechanism, e.g. guardianship or adoption, fails to support this demand.

Applicants are more likely to be able to meet the needs of children in their care if they can have a holistic view of the child and their experiences. Through informed decision making, applicants are able to gain a realistic view of the care task and their own capabilities. One Door explores these concepts within an ecological systems approach.

One Door is a significant shift for the New Zealand Ministry of Social Development ([www.cyf.govt.nz](http://www.cyf.govt.nz)) and its service line, Child, Youth and Family, and the challenges that this presents are also reflected upon here.

### THE EVOLUTION OF ONE DOOR

Currently New Zealanders wishing to care for a child not born to them approach Child, Youth and Family through two doors – fostering or adoption. This division is driven by the legislative mechanism that ultimately formalises their new relationship with the child and the structural division of social work tasks within the organisation.

Increasingly the distinction between these two 'pools' of carers is blurring as people originally prepared and assessed for adoption choose to take on permanent care of children in the care of Child, Youth and Family. It is a natural fit. Once the legal differences are placed to one side, similarities in the parenting tasks associated with permanent care and adoption are easily seen.

It is not just the numbers of children being relinquished that are influencing this shift. The children being placed for domestic and intercountry adoption are no longer a distinct group of infants relinquished at birth. Experience within the Ministry shows that children being adopted within New Zealand often have birth siblings. It is internationally recognised that intercountry adoptions are likely to involve children who are older, may have additional needs, or are sibling groups, and therefore a group that shows similarities to the populations in care in the receiving countries such as New Zealand (Cumming Speirs et al. 2003:77).

When faced with this shifting environment Child, Youth and Family reviewed its approach to foster and adoptive applicant preparation, assessment and training.

'One Door' is the metaphor for a process that will:

- offer a consistent, transparent and responsive preparation, assessment, and training service to anyone wishing to care for a child, irrespective of the legal mechanism involved;
- promote informed decision-making, self-assessment as a companion to social work assessment, skill training and post placement support, thereby creating enduring placements for children and young people;
- make best use of the limited resource of caregivers by providing clarity about the differences between types of care and enabling applicants to actively select where they are best suited. This will focus the assessment process and enhance matching.

### CORRIDORS OF CARE

With the legal division removed, a distinction based on the needs of the children and capabilities of the caregivers is apparent – permanent care versus transition care. This classification of care types is reflected throughout One Door as a way for applicants to consider their, and their family's,

capabilities and desires and the care situation to which they are best suited.

Permanent care establishes a new kinship network. Caregivers need to be assessed and prepared to care for children to maturity – and beyond – as part of their families. The pool of permanent carers may be sought from amongst previous long-term foster caregivers and adoptive applicants. The adoptive applicants may be those from the domestic or the intercountry adoption pools.

Transition care is the task of active nurturing parenting of children during the period in which permanent care is being explored. The permanent care may involve going back home with their parents, family/whānau<sup>1</sup> or with non-kin. Transition caregivers need to be prepared, assessed and supported for the specific task of assisting the child to move from their care.

Family/whānau caregivers may be in permanent or transition situations and meeting the particular needs of this group poses a challenge.

Despite an organisational vision of One Door as crossing legislative boundaries, in practice applicants at the point of first contact are likely still to enquire with a specific view of how they want to care for a child not born to them: by fostering, domestic adoption or intercountry adoption. A few may have also thought of whether they are interested in short-term (transition care) or long-term fostering (permanent care).

The preparation, decision making and assessment the applicants begin will highlight the difference between transition and permanent care, and then the different types of permanent care.

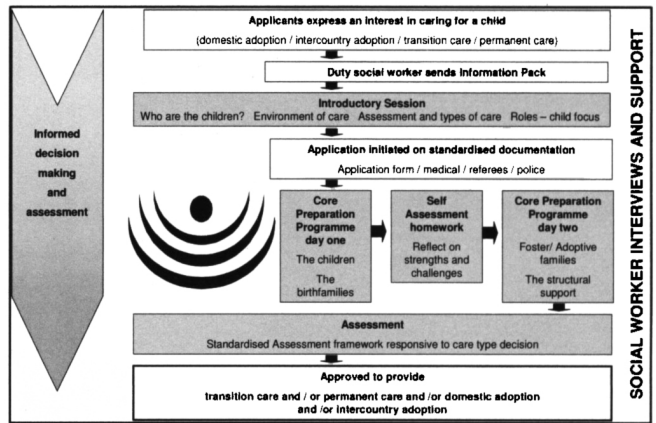
### ONE DOOR INFORMED DECISION MAKING

One Door comprises of two stages – informed decision making and assessment (Figure 1) followed by post approval skill and knowledge development (Figure 2).

The One Door approach recognises that assessment is a continuing process, not a single event. The applicants' journey includes an introductory session and a two day preparation programme focused on informed decision making, prior to approval. The preparation programme caters for all applicants wishing to have a child join their family – domestic adoptive applicants, intercountry adoptive applicants, transition foster caregiver applicants and permanency caregiver applicants. It encourages the

<sup>1</sup> Whanāu is often referred to by non-Maori as extended family; however, whanāu is much wider than this and refers to groups of people with common bonds – including those connected by blood ties – and is often applied to households where two or more generations have relationships with varying degrees of inter-dependence.

FIGURE 1

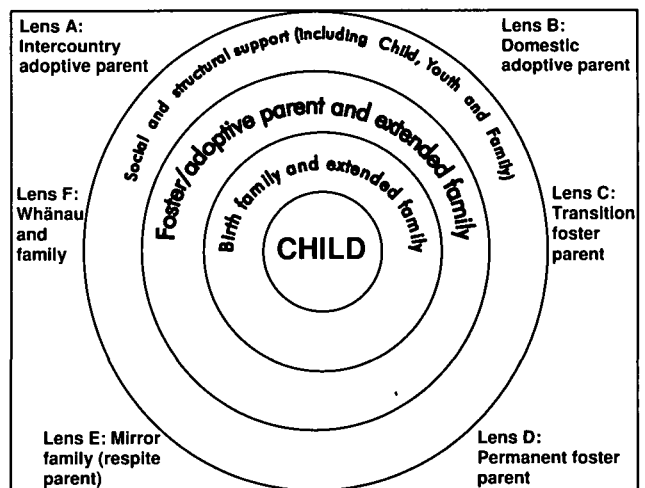


applicants to self-assess their own capability and capacity in respect to the different types of care.

The preparation programme involves practical consciousness-raising techniques to aid decision-making, rather than a delivery of training. The preparation programme is about exploration and clarification, with participants encouraged to be as open as possible during the sessions. The assessment of suitability does not fail or succeed on the participants' questions or responses during the programme, but on their learning. The social workers will be considering the continuing impact of applicants' participation in the preparation programme on their understanding of adoption and fostering. The end result is the assessment of applicants within a standardised assessment/approval framework that is responsive to the different care types and provides for single or multiple kinds of approval.

### CARE AS A SERIES OF SYSTEMS

The information and preparation sessions employ an ecological systems approach as a reflective tool (see below). At the centre is the child and their experiences. Applicants follow the child's journey. Pivotal to this section is that the child is first presented as a whole, competent and confident person.



This is a very deliberate start to the two days. It signals that the child is not a project to be tamed, saved or made normal.

Children [should] no longer ... be seen as empty vessels being passively socialised for adulthood, but [can] be conceptualized as active and interactive practitioners of social life (Smart, Neale & Wade 2001:127).

The development of attachment is discussed. The effect of separation is explored, including the specific situation of the child relinquished via adoption at birth. The development of poor attachment patterns are then explored, as for many children in care inadequate parenting, abuse or multiple placements have altered the child's very way of operating in the world (Kelly 2005:4).

Having a holistic view of the child from the outset will support the applicants' ability to see the child as separate from behaviour that may result from disrupted attachment. Understanding how the child thinks and relates can then inform the applicant's view of the birth family and the journey they too may have taken. Applicants will learn how birth family is an intrinsic part of the child's identity. They will come to know that a child may still have love for a parent who has harmed them, and that this love must be respected.

The One Door approach recognises that establishing a new kinship network ...

... does not signal the absolute end of one family and the beginning of another, nor does it sever the psychological tie to an earlier family. Rather it expands the family boundaries of all those who are involved (Reitz & Watson 1992:11).

Attachment features again in the system's third circle representing the adoptive parent or foster carer. Recent studies of the preparation of applicants for fostering or adoption argue that to look after children effectively, adults need to develop a better understanding of their own attachment history and internal working model (Dozier, Lindhiem & Ackerman 2005; Schofield & Beek n.d.). An applicant brings their life experience, culture and values to the care task. Like each child, each applicant is unique, and therefore a wide range of families is needed in the pool of applicants.

The family system is yet another element within the environment of care. Making the decision to foster or adopt needs to be a family decision. Both partners need to be committed to the idea and to have compatible beliefs and attitudes about parenting. This commitment is ideally demonstrated by couple applicants jointly attending courses and being assessed together. The children in the family also need to be part of the decision. Having another child join the family, even temporarily, alters the family dynamics and environment, and the children in the family will see changes in how their needs can be met.

In conclusion the influence and the role of the organisations that scaffold the placement are reviewed, with particular attention to the relationship Child, Youth and Family will have with the applicants after the placement of the child.

This preparation process encourages the applicants to realistically self-assess their own capability and capacity with respect to the different types of care. When an evaluation of an applicant's capabilities is 'stretched', either by the applicant themselves or the matching social worker, research indicates the risk of disruption is greater (McRoy 1999, cited in Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute 2004:22).

Parental and familial roles will differ according to the type of care arrangement. Exploration of these differences will enable applicants to confirm their choice of approval.

## ASSESSMENT

The holistic child view is repeated in the assessment framework against which applicants are approved. The framework is organised around six broad core needs of a child: safety; attachment; resilience; identity; integrity and support.

1. Safety: being protected from harm or danger and having his/her rights to education, warmth, care and security provided for.
2. Attachment: feeling loved, achieving trust and autonomy, able to be in reciprocal relationships.
3. Resilience: able to express his/her individuality, be capable and self assured.
4. Identity: having an integrated and healthy sense of self.
5. Integrity: developing values, beliefs and behaviours that enable him/her to positively contribute to society.
6. Support: having a sense of belonging to a kinship network and wider society.

These needs are then translated into applicant attributes. An example would be that the child's needs under 'integrity' could be met by adults who can model an acceptance of diversity. This might be demonstrated by the applicants showing that they recognise elements of the child's cultural identity which they are not able to model, and that they can make available realistic alternatives.

By linking assessment directly back to the needs of the child, the intention is that attribute requirements are less likely to be viewed as simply paperwork or a matter of compliance. The use of this unified framework promotes a fair and transparent assessment process that is responsive to the different capabilities involved in transition and permanent care.

The assessment process culminates in applicants being approved to provide transition care and/or permanent care

and/or domestic adoption and/or intercountry adoption. A model of 'dual licensing' is beginning to be used within some child welfare systems outside of New Zealand (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute 2004:37).

**EMPOWERING BIRTH FAMILY**

Having established the importance of recognising all the systems that have influence on the child's life, it is incongruent to ignore this understanding at the point of matching. Yet all too frequently in fostering situations, the birth family is excluded from this step, only to be re-engaged with at the point of contact and access agreements.

For many years in the adoption services provided by Child, Youth and Family, the birth parents have had the opportunity to select families to care for their child using the applicants' profiles. Profiles are produced by the applicants after they have been approved and have concluded any mandatory information session. In text and photos, they give the birth family an idea of who they (the applicants) are and what life they wish to offer a child.

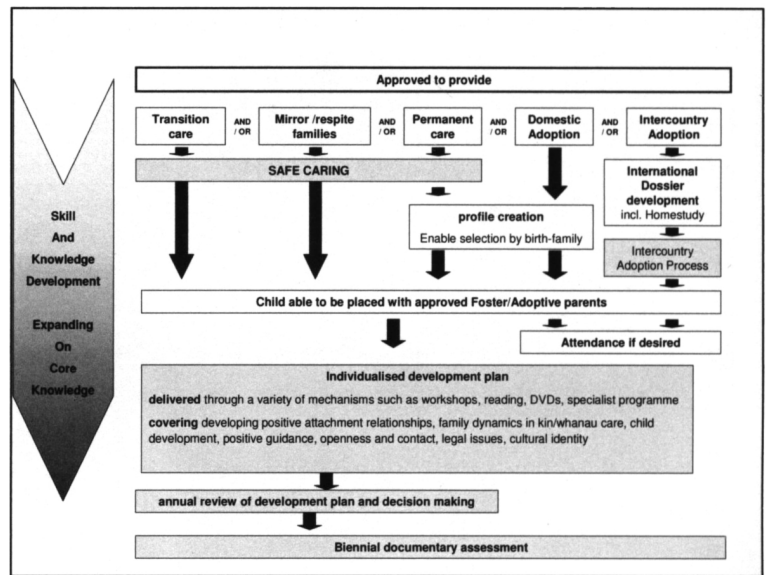
Within the One Door process, when permanent placement is required, the birth parents would, where possible, also be invited to select from a shortlist generated by social workers. For transition foster carers it would be usual for social workers to do the matching, and in intercountry adoption the Central Authorities of the respective countries fulfil this role.

Despite any abuse or neglect that has occurred, birth families need to and usually wish to remain involved in their children's lives. It is usual practice in New Zealand for birth parents to retain a guardianship role after permanent (foster) care orders are made. Involving them in appropriate decisions can result in their supporting the placement. Birth families who are excluded are more likely to be anxious and fearful and try to undermine the child's placement (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute 2007).

**POST APPROVAL TRAINING**

To continue the 'door' metaphor, at some point in the process, the applicants need to diverge into rooms that cater for their specific care approval type. Anyone approved to undertake care of a child on behalf of Child, Youth and Family would be required to attend a training module on safe caring prior to placement of a child. This module extends the attachment learning of the preparation programme into practical steps for developing pro-social behaviours. Active foster carers share their experiences and offer practical suggestions and support. The rights and responsibilities of both Child, Youth and Family and the foster carer are given in greater detail also.

**FIGURE 2**



Intercountry adopters, too, have additional knowledge needs, and attendance at a module designed to meet their specific queries and challenges is required at this point.

**INDIVIDUALISED DEVELOPMENT PLAN**

The need for new information does not stop at the moment of placement. For each foster carer, a development plan will be devised and reviewed annually. Foster carers will have access to a series of skill/knowledge modules that can be selected according to their particular care situation or the type of care-capabilities decision they have made. Annual social work reviews of foster carers may result in a carer being required to upgrade their skill in a particular area to ameliorate any concerns, or carers may choose to extend their capability to care for children with particular needs by attending modules. It is intended that there will be multiple ways these skill/knowledge modules will be presented: internet, workshop, reading, DVD or by interview and 'homework'. Skilled caregiver training is also available from the non-government sector in New Zealand, and Child, Youth and Family foster carers are encouraged to make full use of these resources.

Families formed by adoption would also benefit from having access to many of the workshops. Issues of enhancing resilience, positive guidance or cultural identity would have particular resonance with intercountry adopters.

**OUR CHALLENGES**

One Door provides for a unified application, preparation, assessment, training and support system for applicants wishing to care for a child, whether by adoption, guardianship or as a transitional caregiver. This is a major shift for Child, Youth and Family. A One Door approach presents a number of challenges:

- integrating two separate systems, in terms of both practice and philosophy;
- strengthening care practice;
- meeting the needs and expectations of practitioners and service users;
- staying attuned to the voices of children;
- looking through the lens of whānau/family – introducing flexibility without compromising the design;
- creating sustained change.

One Door demands that those wishing to care for a child not born to them should put aside their preconceived expectations. It also requires the care and adoption social workers to step out of their respective work streams and to think in terms of a wider vision of care.

If a systems approach is to be promoted with respect to the preparation and assessment of applicants, a complementary focus should inform any support of permanent placements. The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, in their 2004 research on foster/adoption placement stability, highlighted the views of scholars like Valentine, Conway and Randolph (1988), that:

... many [care] professionals perceived themselves as primarily advocates for children. However, the authors suggested that family advocacy, rather than child advocacy, may be a more appropriate role for social workers. Indeed, several researchers and other child welfare professionals have commented on the importance of considering the needs and strength of both the child and the family in shaping a comprehensive approach to making and sustaining adoptive placements (Evans B Donaldson Adoption Institute 2004:24).

Where is the child's voice within the design and implementation and review process of One Door? To date, the One Door project has been influenced by research on children's opinions (Smith, Taylor & Gollop 2000). The challenge now is how to have children as an active part of the review process.

Family/whānau are a vital element of the care system in New Zealand, with forty-four per cent of children in the care of Child, Youth and Family placed within their family/whānau group. Whilst the preparation content is all directly relevant to relative carers, relatives have additional issues such as split loyalties or the need to redefine relationships (Crumbley 1997). The programme also has to be able to be delivered in ways that recognise the need for non-kin and family/whānau to draw on content within groups that are relevant to their specific context. For relative applicants already caring for the child prior to an assessment, introducing flexibility into preparation delivery without compromising the design may also be a dilemma.

The One Door project is an innovation that will strengthen and support social work practitioners to match caregivers to children and young people's individual needs and will widen the pool of capable and committed foster carers for children and young people. It is a door of opportunity and possibility that Child, Youth and Family is about to walk through. ■

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