PERMANENCY PLANNING

a redefinition ANTHONY N. MALUCCIO – EDITH FEIN

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As a practice method, permanency planning has been on the scene long enough to require re-evaluation of its underlying theory and implications for social work. The authors therefore offer a comprehensive definition of permanency planning and describe its major features in detail.

Concern about the phenomenon of drift in foster care has given rise to the practice called permanency planning – the process of taking prompt, decisive action to maintain children in their own homes or place them permanently with other families. This is an important movement in child welfare, and there is a continuing need to clarify its meaning so as to promote its development in theory and practice. Following a brief review of the literature, we therefore propose a comprehensive definition of permanency planning and delineate its major components.

DEFINITION

Although much has been written about it, the concept of permanency planning is broad and ambiguous. Pike et al (1977) define it as follows:

Permanency planning means clarifying the intent of the placement, and, during temporary care, keeping alive a plan for permanency. When a temporary placement is prolonged, foster care may have the appearance of permanency, but it lacks the element of intent that is critical to permanency (p. 1).

Emlen et al. (1977: 10 - 11) further explain that the quality of permanence

includes the following features: (1) intent – the home is "intended to last indefinitely," although it is not guaranteed to last forever; (2) commitment and continuity – the family is committed to the child, makes the assumption of a common future, and provides continuity in the child's relationships with caretakers and other family members; (3) legal status – the family offers the child "definitive legal status" protecting his or her rights and interests and promoting a sense of belonging; and (4) social status – the family provides the child with "a respected social status," in contrast to the second-class status typical of prolonged foster care.

Most writers on this subject agree with Emlen et al. and Pike et al. that permanence implies intent. Beyond this, however, there is no common, precise definition of permanency planning. For instance, Cutler and Bateman (1980: 46) note that it "can mean anything from 'planning' to 'facilitiating' to 'achieving' permanent placements for children." Stein et al. (1978: 99) describe it as "a systematic process of gathering and using information, making

informed decisions, formulating case plans, and providing problem-solving services." Maluccio et al. (1980) indicate that it

refers to the idea of moving the child as soon as possible out of temporary substitute care and returning him or her to the family as the preferred alternative or to an adoption home as the second priority, or, if necessary, to another permanent alternative such as a family with legal guardianship (p. 519).

In short, the term "permanency planning" has been applied to many different aspects of child welfare practice, including (1) a philosophical perspective on the primacy of the family as the preferred environment for childrearing: (2) an ongoing problem-solving process; (3) a product, such as adoption; (4) a program to reduce the number of children in foster care; (5) a case management method; and (6) "good" or active casework (Maluccio et al. 1980). Drawing from these varied orientations and building on recent research findings, the following integrative definition of permanency planning is proposed:

Permanency planning is the systematic process of carryingout, within a brief time-limited period, a set of goal-directed activities designed to help children live in families that offer continuity of relationships with nurturing parents or caretakers and the opportunity to establish lifetime relationships.

MAJOR COMPONENTS

This definition leads to a framework for permanency planning that embodies the following key components: (1) values and theory; (2) program; (3) methods; and (4) collaboration. These components are interrelated and complementary, and constitute the essence of the permanency planning movement.

Each component is described below in an analysis of permanency planning as a concept and a movement.

Values and Theory

The permanency planning movement is based on various premises, particularly the value of rearing children in a family setting, the primacy of parent-child attachment, and the significance of the biological family in human connectedness.

These premises are supported by theoretical perspectives and bodies of knowledge from diverse sources. Chief among these is the view that stability in living arrangements and continuity of relationships with parental figures promote a child's growth and development. Many writers have underscored the importance of permanence in living arrangements and continuity of parental relationships for every child. For example, stressing the concept of "psychological parenting," Goldstein, Freud, and Solnit (1973) have advocated legislation to provide each child with a permanent relationship to those adults who have functioned psychologically as his or her parents.

Other related areas include the importance of parent-child bonding, the impact of separation on children and parents, and the ecological approach to service delivery. Focusing on thedynamic transactions between people and their environments, the ecological perspective emphasizes multifaceted intervention with children and families, provision of varied services and supports, and removal of obstacles to parents' coping and adaptive strivings (Bronfenbrenner 1979, Germain and Gitterman 1980, Maluccio 1981a, Maluccio 1981b)

From the assumptions and theoretical perspectives underlying permanency planning flow the following priorities in service delivery:

1. preventing separation of children from their homes by providing necessary supports to families;
2. where separation is necessary, developing plans and providing sup-

port services to enable children to be reunited with their families;
3. where these options are inappropriate, providing highly active services that enable children to be adopted or, where it is the plan of choice, to be placed in a permanent foster home.

Program

Permanency planning embodies a distinctive service delivery program focusing on systematic, goal-directed planning within specified time frames for children placed (or at risk of placement) in foster care. As early as the intake phase, planning becomes a central and continuing component of the helping process, to achieve continuity of care and assure stability in the child's life.

Major programmatic emphases include:

1. Early intervention and consideration of long-term plans for each child beginning even before he or she is actually placed in substitute care.
2. Identification of different options for moving the child out of temporary foster care, with establishment of priorities among the available options The first option considered should be reunification of children with their biological families. Next in order should be placement with relatives, adoption, and planned long-term foster care. Specialized group care may be a last option when no others are possible.
3. Delineation of a time-limited service plan to achieve an appropriate permanent placement. This should include active encouragement of parent-child visiting.
4. Determined use of legal and judicial processes, including organization of legal evidence for a plan, if necessary (e.g., termination of parental rights).
5. Use of periodic case reviews (internal, external, or a combination) to assure that cases are moving according to plan.
6. Provision of comprehensive services to the child's biological family, especially his or her parents. Such a panoply of services should be planned with an ecological perspective, to optimize the interaction of children and parents with their environments.
7. Focus on child welfare at various levels, including needed changes in policy, law, institutional systems, agency management, and social work practice.

Methods

Inherent in permanency planning programs are techniques or case management methods emphasizing specific practice strategies, such as contracts or

service agreements with parents, time deadlines for goal-directed activities by parents and social workers, and record-keeping to structure and reinforce decision-making procedures. These strategies have been discussed in detail by various authors (Howe, Bishop, and Fein 1982; Jones and Biesecker 1980a and 1980b; Pike et al. 1977; Stein, Gambrill, and Wiltse 1978). Their use can help clarify the parents' responsibilities, test their motivation, and mobilize their capacities. Through active involvement in the helping process, parents can better understand what is needed for the child to be able to return home and stay there, or to work toward another plan, if necessary.

Collaboration

A final feature of the framework for permanency planning is collaboration among various individuals, disciplines, and organizations. In most case situations coming to the attention of child welfare agencies, formulation and implementation of an effective permanent plan for a child require a sense of mutual respect and a spirit of active collaboration among child welfare personnel, lawyers, judges, and others working with children and their parents.

Collaboration is important to assure that the professionals involved are not working at cross-purposes and that all of them participate in one focussed plan. Collaboration is also essential to provide continuum of services, including aftercare services that help sustain the permanent plan.

In preparation for reunification of the child with the biological family, for instance, it is crucial to involve resources such as self-help groups, school personnel, or child guidance clinic staff - in short, anyone who might provide ongoing support to the child and parents. The progress that a child and his or her parents have made during the course of temporary foster care frequently needs to be buttressed by services and supports in such areas as to try innovative services, such as parent aides, homemakers, home management specialists, or older persons who model effective parental behaviours to help meet the needs of parents, enrich the family's environment, and prevent placement or replacement.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As permanency planning gains currency in the field of child welfare, greater clarity about its meaning, practice, and implications will be expected. The definition and framework presented in this article lead to some far-reaching questions:

1. Is there danger of permanency planning becomeing merely a program label, covering only cosmetic changes in service delivery?

2. Does initiating a permanency planning policy require a shift of resources from remedial to preventive services, to avert placements in vulnerable families?

3. Can families' strengths rather than their weaknesses be accepted by professionals profoundly enough to make the ecological perspective work?

4. Can resources be allocated to maintenance of a permanent plan — the old aftercare dilemma?

5. What supports do professionals need as they go about their difficult decision making, attempting to balance the feelings and rights of parents against the needs and time constraints of childhood?

6. Can a society moving toward greater instability in all its aspects provide permanence and stability for its children?

These questions suggest a variety of side effects, controversial issues, and potential dangers in permanecy planning. Despite these, the movement holds great promise for achieving the goal of permanent families for all children. It is the minimum that we should expect for the two million children in the child welfare system.

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