

Reaching Out

CURRENT ISSUES FOR CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

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Concurrent Planning—Existing Challenges and New Possibilities

By Susan Brooks, Director, Northern California Training Academy, Center for Human Services, UC Davis Extension

Concurrent planning—the practice of simultaneously pursuing more than one option for permanency for children placed by child welfare in out-of-home care—has been required in California for more than 10 years. While research shows when done effectively, concurrent planning does cut down on the length of time children are in foster care, California's experience illustrates some of concurrent planning's implementation challenges. Some of these challenges are philosophical, some are financial, and some are logistical.

Here are some things to ponder:

- While private adoptions are more open to various degrees of contact between birth and adoptive families, adoptions arranged through child welfare departments have remained closed. Perhaps if we allowed for more openness in county-initiated adoptions, birth parents could more easily decide to place their child with a family better able to care for him or her.
- Concurrent planning efforts often rest on a notion of sequential parenting. Child welfare staff makes plans for one family and if that

doesn't work out, shifts to another. This implies children can only bond with one set of parents at a time. What if we looked at more inclusive roles for the adults in children's lives including birth parents who may no longer be able to serve as the primary custodial parents, but may still have other appropriate roles in their children's lives?

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- Because concurrent planning looks at more than one option for a child's permanency at the same time, some caseworkers feel a contradiction between working diligently and authentically on reunification efforts with birth parents while working diligently on a Plan B in case reunification doesn't happen. Some workers feel that working on a Plan B means they don't believe the reunification is possible. Can insisting that the focus remain on the child's permanency—and including birth parents as a vital part of the process from the start—improve workers' sense of efficacy?
- Research has shown that effective concurrent planning takes time, and to give this time, caseworkers need manageable caseloads. As we know, California is currently facing an unprecedented state budget crisis. Can the state fund caseloads at the level workers need in order to successfully practice concurrent planning? If not, what do workers have the time to do?

- While there is very little data on this, it would be interesting to find out how concurrent planning addresses the racial disparity in child welfare outcomes. Does it have any noticeable impact?

Despite the challenges to practicing concurrent planning most effectively, we must never lose sight of its important goal: to find children permanent, stable homes and family relationships as quickly as possible and to shift the burden of risk and uncertainty onto adults' instead of children's shoulders where it has resided for too long.

This issue of *Reaching Out* looks at concurrent planning including information about effective practice, some updates about plans in California to improve concurrent planning efforts and a profile of one northern county's concerted efforts to improve permanency outcomes for its children and families.





Definitions

Concurrent planning: a process of working toward reunification with parents while at the same time establishing an alternative or contingency back-up plan for permanent placement (Ott, 1998, NRCFCPP). This back-up plan can include placing children with relatives or with families who are willing to adopt the children if reunification with the birth families isn't possible.

Concurrent services track: the portion of the case plan for a child receiving family reunification services which identifies the child's permanency alternative and the services necessary to achieve permanency should family reunification fail (California Child Welfare Services Manual Sec. 31-002).

Full disclosure: the act of being open and straightforward with birth parents about concurrent planning, with an emphasis on the child's need for stability and permanence. All information is shared by the social worker with parents as well as with others involved in a case, including the child, relative caretakers, foster parents, community organizations, judicial court officers and attorneys. Judicial bench officers and attorneys are also responsible for fully informing the parents about concurrent planning ("Pathways to Permanency: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Permanency Planning" California Social Work Education Center. Rev: 09/27/02).

Out-of-home care: living arrangements made for children who have been removed from their homes by a child welfare department for abuse and/or neglect—also known as foster care or kinship care if provided by family members.

Parental ambivalence: in the context of child welfare, this refers to indecisiveness and uncertainty by the parent with regard to the parent's roles, responsibilities and reunification with the child. The assessment of parental ambivalence is important in evaluating the potential for reunification. Research shows that when parents are ambivalent about parenting in general or parenting a specific child, successful family reunification is seriously impaired (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services).

Resource family: relative caregivers, licensed foster parents and adoptive parents who meet the needs of children who cannot safely remain at home. Resource families participate as members of the multidisciplinary team.

Sequential planning: the practice of working on one permanency plan at a time for a child who has been removed from his/her home and is living in out-of-home care. Historically, social workers focused on trying to reunify a child in foster care with his/her birth family. If, after a period of time, that didn't succeed, the social worker looked toward the next option for the child's permanency. While this used to be the accepted practice in child welfare, it has been blamed for children having multiple placements and living in foster care for extended periods of time.

TPR—Termination of Parental Rights: the legal process by which a court ends a person's legal rights and responsibilities as a parent of a specific child. This most often refers to terminating a birth parent's parental rights in order to allow a child to be adopted by another adult.

These definitions were drawn from a number of sources including the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning, the Children's Bureau, the State of California Child Welfare Manual and an article by Sonya J. Leathers entitled, "Parental Visiting and Family Reunification: How Inclusive Practice Makes a Difference."



Concurrent planning is based on the philosophy that adults, rather than children, should assume the emotional risk in foster care. It assumes that adults are better able to manage the ambiguity of relationships and the uncertainty of an unknown future than are children, so the emotional burden is shifted.

*Source: "Concurrent Planning: Core Principles," (October 2003)
The Center for Social Services Research*

Overview

An Overview of Concurrent Planning

Concurrent planning is a child-centered strategy in child welfare designed to reduce the time to permanency for children in out-of-home care. Concurrent planning is a type of permanency case planning in which reunification services are provided to the family of a child in foster care at the same time that an alternative permanency plan is made for the child, in case reunification efforts fail (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2007).

To be effective, concurrent planning requires not only the identification of an alternative plan but also the implementation of active efforts toward both plans simultaneously, with the full knowledge of all case participants. Compared to more traditional sequential planning for permanency in which one permanency plan is ruled out before an alternative is developed, concurrent planning may provide earlier permanency for the child (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2007).

This two-pronged approach to finding a safe and stable family for children reduces multiple placements and long delays for children in foster care, and it promotes children building strong connections and trust with permanent families.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 addressed the importance of timely permanency for children in foster care and established federally mandated timelines to achieve this permanency. ASFA also suggested concurrent planning as an appropriate strategy for shortening a child's time in foster care. As a result of ASFA, many states wrote policies on concurrent planning with some states, including California, requiring it for every child in out-of-home care, with a few exceptions.

Although there is some variation among concurrent planning models and the way in which they are implemented, research and state policy agencies generally agree that sound concurrent planning includes the following components:

- Individualized assessment and intensive, time-limited work with families to address problems that necessitate out-of-home placement for children
- Full, honest and documented disclosure with birth parents concerning identified problems, changes that must be made, possible consequences and timeframes
- Early determination of paternity and family finding activities to identify possible resource families among the child's relatives

Interactions with families should be based on respect, honesty and openness. This approach is not only essential for family engagement but also to clarify ethical considerations for caseworkers and legal issues for the courts.

"Concurrent Planning: What the Evidence Shows;" (2005) Child Welfare Information Gateway

view

- Collaboration among parents, foster parents, service providers and those within the child welfare and legal systems in the early identification and consideration of all reasonable options for permanency
- Frequent and constructive use of parent-child visiting as part of reunification efforts. This implies visits that are carefully planned, based on the child's developmental needs and used for both skill development and assessment of parental progress. The frequency of visits in concurrent planning is based on the unique family and child needs rather than on arbitrary policy guidelines.
- The early use of foster/adoptive placements or kinship placements that can provide permanence for children if they are unable to return to their families of origin
- Involvement of foster/adoptive and kinship parents in working directly with the biological parents to teach skills and communicate children's needs
- Support for and coordination of case activities between the courts and child welfare departments

Successful concurrent planning depends on several groups working together to assure timely permanence for a child in out-of-home care. The articles in this newsletter examine what we are currently doing successfully and highlight areas for improving our practice.

Excerpted from Concurrent Planning for Permanency for Children; State Statutes Series; Child Welfare Information Gateway (2007). www.childwelfare.gov



California's Program Improvement Plan: Concurrent Planning

In 2008, the Administration for Children and Families conducted its second Child and Family Service Review of California's provision of child welfare services. Since the first review in 2002, the California Department of Social Services made a number of effective changes in how it provides services. This included conducting an 11-county pilot project and then implementing a statewide standardized assessment, expanding the piloting of models for differential response, as well as developing protocols for permanency and youth transition.

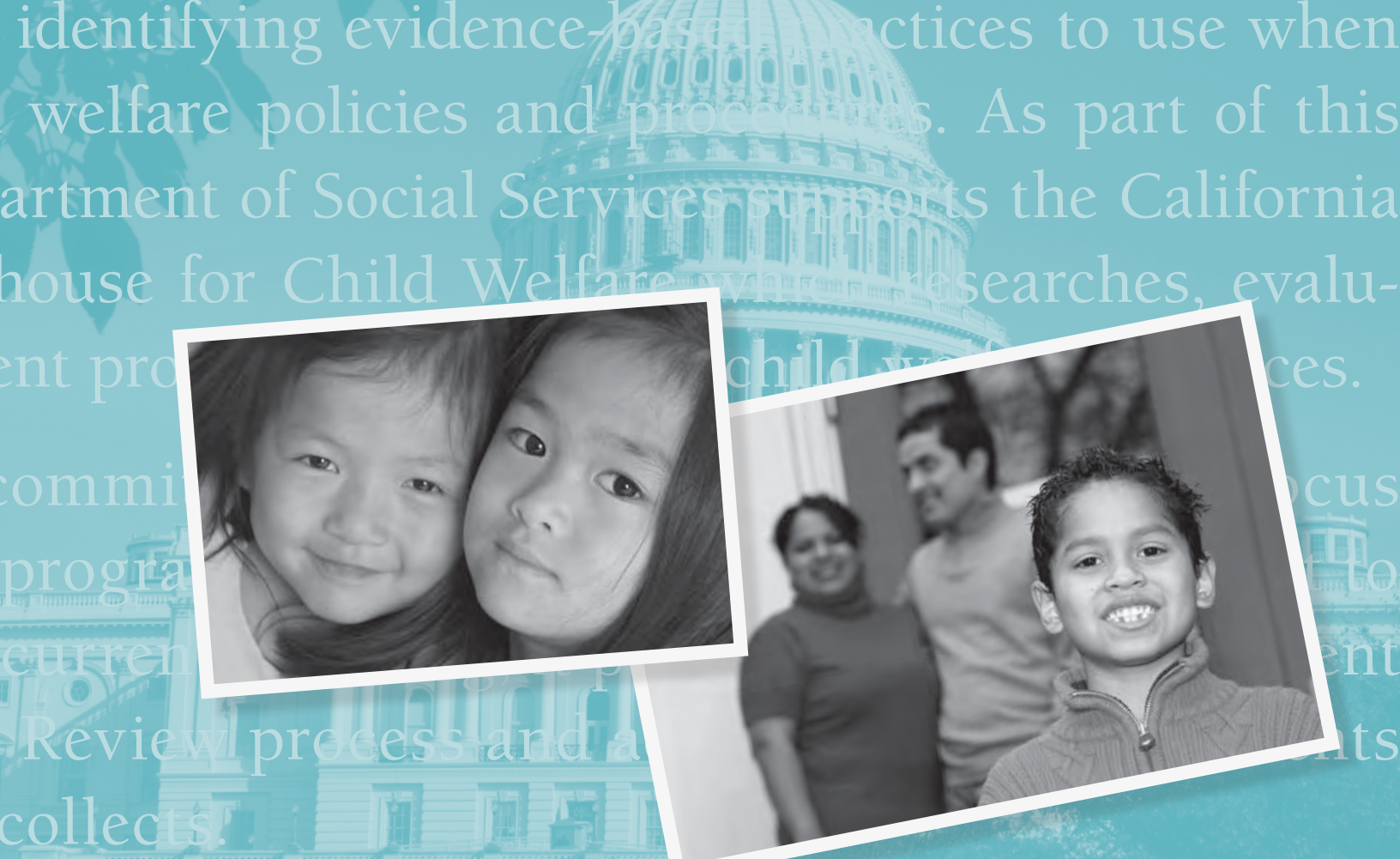
While the 2008 review noted California's progress, it also outlined areas that still needed improvement including how the state provided concurrent planning services. Specifically, the review found the following:

- An inconsistency and lack of uniformity in concurrent planning statewide. This included keeping permanency as a goal foremost throughout the life of a case.
- Insufficient and late efforts to identify extended family members who might provide permanent homes
- An inconsistency in the early inclusion of parents and other family and tribal members as appropriate in case planning and decision-making
- Insufficient efforts to support a child's relationship with parents including a lack of quality social worker visits that included an evaluation of strengths and needs and an insufficient effort to promote visitation with a child's mother, father and siblings
- Difficulties with timely notification of court proceedings to interested parties (tribes, caregivers and youth)



The Administration for Children and Families also noted that child welfare departments in California don't file to terminate parental rights in a timely way. This item reflects a philosophical difference between California and the federal government. California wants to guard against children in out-of-home care being in legal limbo for too long a period, so child welfare departments choose not to file to terminate parental rights until they have identified a family with whom to start guardian or adoption proceedings. The federal government believes that parental rights should be terminated as soon as it is clear that reunification efforts have ended.

- In response to the other findings mentioned above, the state included the following responses in its 2009 Program Improvement Plan:
- The state is committed to identifying evidence-based practices to use when making changes to child welfare policies and procedures. As part of this effort, the California Department of Social Services supports the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare which researches, evaluates and publicizes different promising and proven child welfare practices.
- The department is also committed to continuing to shift program focus more toward improving program outcomes. In the department's effort to improve how it does concurrent planning, it proposes adding an element to the Peer Quality Case Review process and adding three data elements to what the department collects.



Addressing the above concerns the Department of Social Services (DSS) plans to do the following:

- Better identify and remove the barriers that prevent a child from keeping a permanent family, particularly barriers for relative caregivers
- Revise and strengthen both the basic and advanced concurrent planning training that social workers receive. DSS also plans to enhance training for probation staff including advertising the mandated training on concurrent planning.
- Enhance practices and strategies that result in more children/youth having permanent homes and connections to communities, culture and important adults. This includes increased efforts to locate mothers, fathers and maternal/paternal family members at the onset of a case and strengthen family connections across the life of the case. DSS plans to write and disseminate protocols on locating family and strengthening family connections and track how many children are first placed with relatives.
- Develop a legislative proposal for trial home visits and promote the use of family advocates and mentor models through dissemination of promising/evidence based practices
- Improve participatory case planning by including increased training for child welfare staff, identifying promising practices and expanding effective model case planning approaches statewide. DSS will also develop a specialized training in how to engage fathers. DSS will increase the engagement of children/youth, families and

others in case planning and decision-making processes across the life of the case. The department will also improve data tracking of this item. DSS will determine a baseline for participatory planning and revise protocols based on the lessons learned in the 11-county pilot.

- Modify the Peer Quality Case Review process to include assessment of the quality of social worker visits with parents and children, and when appropriate, concurrent planning. DSS understands that a strong visiting component is key to successful concurrent planning efforts.

To address the judicial coordination of concurrent planning activities, the Administrative Office of the Courts will provide ongoing training and technical assistance to dependency courts and stakeholders regarding reunification, tribal engagement, concurrent planning and participatory case planning

Once approved by the federal Administration for Children and Families, the Program Improvement Plan submitted by the California Department of Social Services will cover the period from July 2009 through June 2012.

The above material is excerpted from the second draft of the California Department of Social Services' Program Improvement Plan submitted to the Administration for Children and Families on April 20, 2009. Available at www.childsworld.ca.gov/res/pdf/PIP2ndDraft.pdf

Siskiyou County—A Committed Partnership between County Agencies and the Court

In the vast but sparsely populated county of Siskiyou, high poverty levels, high rate of unemployment and a lack of available county resources make collaborative case planning more important than ever.

Last October, Superior Court Judge William Davis called together all partners working with child welfare children and families in Siskiyou County. This included attorneys involved in dependency, child welfare social workers, foster family agencies, CASA representatives, local tribal representatives, probation officers, behavioral health and other administrators. Judge Davis wanted to examine how these systems were doing at implementing concurrent planning.

“It was my perception that concurrent planning was often not started early on in the case,” Judge Davis said. “I wanted our county to be up to date on the latest best practices so that we didn’t fall short. I was also particularly concerned about finding permanence for children beyond typical adoption age.”

The day-long convening combined expert-led presentations with smaller breakout sessions on specific topics like case planning, visitation, family finding, older youth permanency and resource families. Participants from the child welfare, probation, court and behavioral health systems along with partner agency representatives discussed ideas, listened to one another and began laying out framework strategies for improving outcomes for children and families in their county.

For visits, participants discussed strategies like using standard definitions for the different levels of supervision and including visit planning in family meeting conferences. They agreed on the value of identifying family members who can support the visits (transporting, supervising, observing, teaching parenting skills, etc.) and having these family members attend case planning meetings. They also discussed developing a family empowerment group in Siskiyou County as a way to help parents learn about their rights and responsibilities, gain parenting skills and receive other support services such as treatment for a parent’s initial anger, confusion and grief so the parent is better able to interact with his or her child at visits.

The group also discussed the question: “What is good enough parenting?” and agreed that county standards must be adopted to determine when a parent is so unsafe that the child must be removed as well as whether or not a child should be returned to a parent who has met those standards. The group stressed the need for clarity and fairness across all families so decisions are not dependent upon the assigned caseworker.

In its assessment of concurrent planning for older youth, the group agreed that this process is minimally used for older youth, if at all, in the county. Therefore, the group determined that CPS and Probation should immediately identify the loneliest youth (youth who have been in care for the longest periods of time without a connection to family members or a caring adult). The systems identified the need to implement a family finding procedure to be used by Siskiyou. The group further agreed to allow for the provision that longest-waiting youth will have priority in searches followed by searches for every child coming into care.

“The issue of family finding is one of our big challenges,” Judge Davis said. “At the convening, the CASA program director, Karen Bowers, agreed to assist with improving our family finding efforts. It is really helpful to have this level of collaboration between our CASA program and the human services department.”

Since the convening, Judge Davis has met with groups of attendees to develop implementation plans, and he intends to hold a full follow-up convening in the near future. Judge Davis did express that some changes have already taken place in the county:

“With CPS, one of the things we decided to focus on was a change in the way caseworkers reported on concurrent planning in their case reports. In the past, they gave a generalized statement in their report. As a result of our convening, child welfare workers now specify who they have spoken to as possible long-term placement options, what they’ve found out about them and why these people may or may not be suitable for a child placement. This level of detail gives the court pertinent information in order to move a case forward.”

With its strong partnerships and collaborative efforts, Siskiyou County is committed to doing everything possible to support the goal of concurrent planning and permanency for all children in foster care.

Cooperation and preparation of the judicial system is especially critical. More timely planning and casework services cannot be effective without the development and enforcement of judicial procedures that ensure smooth progress of cases through court.

Source: “Concurrent Planning: What the Evidence Shows,” (2005)
Child Welfare Information Gateway



Promising Practices in Concurrent Planning

In 2003, the Child Welfare Research Center at the UC Berkeley Center for Social Services Research conducted a study titled, “Child Welfare Permanency Reforms.” As part of that research, the center produced a series of brief publications focusing on concurrent planning in California. One of these publications addressed promising practices in the state. What follows is an excerpt from that publication.

- Concurrent planning practice is institutionalized through communication of a set of principles by agency directors and managers, and translation into policies and practices at a variety of levels. This includes training on concurrent planning for child welfare workers and supervisors in all units of the agency. (Training communicates institutional support for acting in “dual” roles and clarification of roles for child welfare workers in various parts of the agency with respect to concurrent planning.) Practical tools for implementing concurrent planning (e.g., guidelines, checklists, referral forms) are actively developed and disseminated. Policies and procedures incorporate concurrent planning as a valued mode of child welfare practice (e.g., inclusion of concurrent planning as a standard in employee evaluations).
- A formal search for relatives and absent parents, including resolution of paternity issues and compliance with Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) requirements, takes place early in every case. This also includes a search for any siblings so that they may be placed together.
- Specific recruitment, screening, training and support is provided to concurrent placement families (kin and non-kin) to assist in preparing for the emotional and practical challenges of concurrent planning.
- Regular collaborative case reviews encourage thoughtful discussion of concurrent planning alternatives and provide collegial and supervisory support for workers making difficult decisions within limited time frames. Reviews begin early in the case to identify children needing a permanent plan and to ensure participants retain a sense of urgency regarding the need to consider concurrent plans (e.g., prior to the Jurisdictional/Dispositional Hearing, every three months for children under age three and every six months for children over age three, and reviews every six months for all children past termination of reunification services).
- The goals of child welfare and adoption units and agencies are integrated to promote concurrent planning, and the functions of each are carefully coordinated to meet these goals. This includes a formalized process of identification and “referral” of cases appropriate for concurrent placement and training in the process conducted for workers and supervisors in all units of an agency. Whether an internal unit or an external agency is used for adoption services, cooperative working relationships are nurtured.
- Clear definitions and procedures are in place regarding the process and content of “full disclosure” regarding concurrent planning (e.g., who will know what, when and how).
- Formal and informal opportunities for communication are available between workers with different responsibilities on concurrent planning cases (e.g., court workers, continuing services workers and placement or adoption workers).
- Intensive support services to birth parents are available early in the reunification process (e.g., at Detention and Disposition) to help manage emotional reactions, facilitate parents’ taking of responsibility, educate parents about the child welfare intervention process and support engagement in services.
- Interagency committees and partnerships are developed in support of concurrent planning practice. Examples include a focus on early questions related to permanency (e.g., Behavioral Health screenings of all children and adults prior to Jurisdictional/Dispositional Hearings to consider service needs and their impact on case status) as well as later permanency issues (e.g., interagency review committees involving Child Welfare, Probation and Behavioral Health for older youth transitioning to emancipation including an emphasis on identifying and forging relationships with individuals who can make a lasting emotional commitment to the youth).



“Concurrent Planning: Core Principles and Promising Practices.” The Center for Social Science Research. 2003. <http://cssr.berkeley.edu>

Concurrent Planning Checklist for Counties

Consistency in providing concurrent planning in child welfare cases is critical both during the life of an individual case and from county to county. One way to ensure this consistency is for counties to conduct a self-assessment on how they provide concurrent planning services. What follows is a sample checklist of the components of concurrent planning which counties can use to effectively implement and practice concurrent planning.

- ❑ All of our child welfare staff has been trained in the philosophy and practice of concurrent planning including ongoing refresher training for seasoned staff and introductory training for new staff. This training focuses on the goal of timely permanence for children and includes information on child development, participatory case planning and working successfully with birth and resource families.
- ❑ We have thoughtfully planned and structured a model of providing concurrent planning services that works in our organization.



- ❑ We have the necessary policies and procedures, performance measures (including employee performance) and written materials (handbook, forms, etc.) to support our concurrent planning practice.
- ❑ All of our partners in concurrent planning including child welfare staff, the courts, community partners, parent advocates and others share a common philosophy, have received training on, and work effectively together to facilitate the concurrent planning process. All of our partners are clear on their roles and responsibilities.
- ❑ Our social workers have the caseload size and level of supervision they need to effectively provide concurrent planning services.
- ❑ If more than one worker is involved in the concurrent planning process for a specific case, there is ample opportunity for these workers to communicate with each other.

- ❑ We provide initial and ongoing in-depth, individualized, culturally appropriate assessments for birth parents to determine both their needs for reunification and their likelihood of reunification.
- ❑ Our social workers clear cases at the beginning of their work with the family for any Indian Child Welfare Act issues and to make sure paternity is established.
- ❑ Our social workers review the case file and talk with parents early on to determine who might best serve as an alternative placement for their child in case reunification doesn't work out.
- ❑ We have an effective process for family finding including missing parents and siblings. Our concurrent plans address the possibility of placing siblings together.
- ❑ From the start of making a concurrent plan, our social workers practice full disclosure with all involved parties including the birth parents, the resource family and, if appropriate, the child.
- ❑ In partnership with parents, the resource family and, if appropriate, the child, our social workers create a detailed concurrent case plan that includes specific activities, goals, expectations and timelines.
- ❑ Our social workers arrange and support early and frequent visiting by parents and siblings. The schedule is flexible in terms of when and where visits occur.
- ❑ We have a wide range of services available to support birth families with reunification. Our concurrent case plans include providing intensive services to birth parents early on to assist in reunification. We also regularly conduct and disseminate a survey of services needed and available in various communities in both our county and nearby counties.
- ❑ We have an effective system in place to recruit and train resource families (kin and non-kin) including clear explanations of their roles in concurrent planning.
- ❑ We provide ongoing, additional support to resource families.
- ❑ We have a system in place for resource families to work with birth families. We include resource families in the case planning process.
- ❑ We regularly review cases with concurrent plans to assess the child's progress toward permanency. This assessment also includes the birth parents' progress on the case plan. The regular review includes all parties in participatory case planning.
- ❑ We have a process in place to make permanency plans for older youth in care.
- ❑ The child welfare department and judicial courts have coordinated their efforts in concurrent planning cases. This includes timely notification by the child welfare department to all interested parties of any court hearings.
- ❑ Our data system tracks elements of concurrent planning such as children's placement with relatives, visits with social workers and returns to foster care.

To succeed, concurrent planning must be supported philosophically and with adequate resources both within the child welfare agency and among service providers and related professionals including birth and foster families. Lack of acceptance on the part of any group can jeopardize the effectiveness of the approach.

"Concurrent Planning: What the Evidence Shows;" (2005) Child Welfare Information Gateway

10 Pitfalls of Concurrent Planning

Just as there are guiding principles and best practices for successful concurrent planning, there are also certain pitfalls that can undermine a county's best efforts. What follows is a list of some of the mistakes that can derail a county's concurrent planning practice.

1. Not attending promptly to potential concurrent planning "time grabbers."

Social workers need to make sure they have completed any ICWA-required activities and also that they have determined paternity for the children in out-of-home care. They need to complete these activities at the very beginning of the case so they don't delay future actions.

2. Giving social workers higher caseloads than they can handle to effectively practice concurrent planning.

Concurrent planning is more time consuming than sequential planning. This is true not only because social workers need to work on Plans A and B at the same time but also because social workers need to commit to intensive work with birth parents to see if they can successfully reunify with their children.

3. Not having adequate resources for birth families.

If families and social workers put together a detailed Plan A for reunification, but the county or surrounding area does not offer the services the birth family needs, it may be difficult for the birth family to succeed. By the same token, it isn't fair to shortchange a birth parent's plan because the county does not have the resources. Counties should assess service barriers and advocate for needed resources.

4. Social workers may feel disloyal to birth parents if they practice concurrent planning.

They may feel making a Plan B gives birth parents the message that they don't believe the birth parents can succeed. Social workers need the training and support to realize that concurrent planning shifts the focus to finding permanency for children as soon as possible. If social workers have open and honest conversations with birth parents throughout the life of the case and include birth parents in the creation of both Plans A and B, they share responsibility for the case outcome.

5. At the other end of the spectrum, social workers can make the mistake of equating concurrent planning with adoption and therefore minimizing reunification efforts. This can lead to social workers scheduling fewer visits between birth parents and their children.*

6. Assuming that the initial assessment will infallibly predict case outcomes. This may also lead to minimizing reunification efforts and decreasing visitations if the assessment indicates a possible poor outcome. Ultimately, the child's parents will support or prove wrong the assessed placement outcome.*

7. Social workers investing in a particular outcome. Again, this mistake can influence how much time and energy a social worker puts into Plan A or B. Social workers need to allow the case to evolve from the family's decisions and actions.*

8. Designing case plans that are not family-centered. Put another way, the agency takes on responsibility for things the parents should be doing. Parents have both rights and responsibilities. Concurrent planning supports their active role in visitation, engaging in services and planning for their child's future.*

9. Offering foster parents and relatives an estimate of "legal risk." Let the adults take the risks, not the children. Acknowledge that foster/adoptive parents are taking on the role of "Plan B" and still supporting parental visitation. This is not easy. Encourage foster/adoptive parents to become involved in parent-child visits to promote more supportive relationships with biological parents.*

10. Interpreting 12 months as an absolute limit on reunification, regardless of parental progress.

"There is a fine line between the judicious use of time limits to prevent foster care drift, and a rote enforcement that ignores the full picture of parental motivation, effort, incremental progress and a foreseeable reunification" (Katz, 1999).*

*These were excerpted from "Visitation and Concurrent Planning" in the October 2000 issue of *Children's Services Practice Notes For North Carolina Child Welfare Social Workers*; Vol. 5, No. 4; by the North Carolina Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program.



Discussions with birth parents about concurrent planning should rest on a foundation of the following values:

- **Parents ultimately decide the outcome of a case.**
- **Parents have a right to know the permanency timeline.**
- **Parents can handle the truth.**
- **Parents need to give and receive information in order to make informed choices.**
- **Parents are our peers.**

Feb. 13, 2003 web cast titled "Concurrent Planning: Strategies for Implementation" organized by the National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning



How to Have the Hard Conversations: Talking with Birth Parents about Concurrent Planning

The time just after their children have been removed because of allegations of abuse or neglect can understandably be one of anger, panic and despair for birth parents. This is often the atmosphere in which social workers start their conversations with parents about concurrent planning. Establishing a strong, open and honest relationship with birth parents is a critical part of successful concurrent planning. Full disclosure with birth parents, resource parents and, if they are old enough, the children in out-of-home care means that everyone knows the complete information they need to make an informed decision regarding the concurrent plan. But there are many ways to initiate and sustain this discussion.

In an April 20, 2009, interview, Rose Wentz, a national expert on child welfare and consultant for the National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning, discussed some tips on how to have these conversations with birth parents, and make them positive and productive.

She outlined four assumptions she makes in a discussion of concurrent planning. These are:

- Social workers must always approach their work with clients with a great deal of empathy and respect. Social workers need to see birth parents as their partners in the concurrent planning process. Birth parents know their child better than anyone else and must be involved in the decisions about their children's future.
- Children can bond with more than one set of parents or caregivers. As we have seen in divorced and blended families, children can move fairly easily between different sets of parents particularly if the parents work together.

- With rare exceptions, no matter what the outcome of the concurrent plan, children do want a relationship with their birth parents. If reunification does not work out, this relationship with birth parents can vary from writing letters and sending pictures to regular contact and involvement.
- Whether parents agree or not with why the children were removed, they have to be involved with the decision of how to move forward. And part of the social worker's job is to help them do that. Parents have to be an integral part of the concurrent process. Sometimes social workers fall into the trap of dictating to parents what they need to do. Inclusive practice mean that everyone is working together on the plan.

Beginning with these assumptions, here are tips to help social workers more successfully have the hard conversations with birth parents about concurrent planning:





Tips for social workers

- 1** Spend time with parents building common goals. Talk with them about what their values are as parents and what they want for their children. Ask parents who they go to when they need help, and what you can do to help them.
- 2** Encourage storytelling by the parent. This helps parents focus on the good things they may have done and want for their children. Ask parents how they celebrate holidays and birthdays. Ask for favorite memories of when their child was younger. Ask them to describe their child including the child's strengths.
- 3** Motivate parents. Threats don't motivate. Don't jump right in and talk about guardianship and adoption. Ask them solution-focused questions such as how they picture their children as young adults and think about what they can do to get their kids there. What are their goals for themselves and their children? What are the things that work for them as parents (strengths) and what are some of the challenges they face?
- 4** What the child needs has to be front and center at all times. Social workers need to reassure parents that, along with safety, they also have the child's well-being as their main focus. Discussions with birth parents should revolve around what the child needs including finding a safe and permanent home as soon as possible, and maintaining connections with the child's family, friends and community.
- 5** All parties need to be clear on what needs to happen for successful reunification. If parents and all parties who are interested in the child's well-being are involved and participate as equal partners in the process from the start, there should be no surprises about what needs to happen and who is responsible for what.
- 6** Reassure parents that concurrent planning is not a competition between them and another set of parents. Birth and foster parents must work together for the child's best interests. Have people sit down and make specific agreements about who will make certain decisions while the child is in out-of-home care. Some examples are haircuts, television and movie rules, and religious practices.
- 7** Don't make false promises but address the parents' concerns. Reassure them while also saying that you can't predict the outcome. Let them know that no matter what happens, your job is to make sure that in the future, they have the best parent/child relationship possible.
- 8** Try using the following analogy in your discussion with birth parents: While this is hard to think about, all parents need to think about who would take care of their children if they were not able to. Birth parents, if they haven't already, need to think about who would raise the child the way they would want.

If social workers and birth parents focus on the child's needs, and the process is inclusive and open, then everyone is on the same side—the child's.

*Many of these same tips can be used when talking with resource parents.



Family Finding: Not Just a Fall-Back Strategy for Permanency

The Family Finding model has primarily been used as a strategy for permanence, particularly for youth in long-term care who are close to aging out of the foster care system. Child welfare workers are now turning to this model as a useful tool to identify a permanent placement option at the front end of a child's entry into the child welfare system.

How Family Finding got started

A number of years ago, a small group of child welfare professionals began to research the parallel between children in foster care who had no permanent family connections and children in war-torn countries who had been separated from their families. These researchers believed the Red Cross' approach to finding families could also work with kids adrift in foster care. This was the beginning of the Family Finding model.

The Family Finding philosophy

The Family Finding model is based on two beliefs: 1) humans have a burning desire and the right to know where their families are and to have a permanent connection with them, and 2) families are the normative setting in which to raise children.

The Family Finding model doesn't condone jeopardizing a child's safety by placing children with adults just because they are family. It does propose that healthy, functioning family members are out there for almost every child in foster care, many of whom don't know the child's situation.

The steps to finding families

The Family Finding model uses a deceptively simple process. It starts with gathering the names of a child's family members both from a thorough search of his/her child welfare file as well as from discussions with the birth parents and the children themselves.

The next step is to use the Internet and genealogy techniques to search for the people mentioned. According to the model, each person has between 100 and 300 living relatives!

Once the person using the Family Finding model has located a large group of family members, the next step is to contact them. Using carefully devised scripts, the caller lets the family members know about the child in foster care and asks for their help in providing information for the child. The worker gathers this important information including names and addresses of other family members, always with the aim of building permanent connections and possibly providing a permanent home.

The next step is to include the located and screened family members in the child's plan for permanency. Using concurrent planning, social workers must exercise full disclosure to birth parents during this process as they prepare for "Plan B" and simultaneously work toward the possibility of reunification.

Should reunification efforts fail, the final step in the process is to provide adequate support for the child and his/her newfound family. Some children who have been in long-term foster care have experienced chronic trauma and are struggling with depression or severe behavioral issues. Family members need help to understand what the child has been through and the best way to support him/her.

"We as professionals need to believe that there absolutely are family members out there who can make a meaningful contribution to a child."

~ Patti Renfro, Family Search and Engagement coordinator and trainer, Catholic Community Services, Vancouver, Washington

Comments from those in the trenches

A number of counties and states have adopted the Family Finding model and report positive results. In Illinois, the State Department of Children and Family Services initiated the Intensive Relative Search/Lifelong Connections Project. The director of this project, Brian Samuels, made the following powerful observation:

It is never too late to look for family for a youth in care. Success will be achieved for more children if work is begun early in the case—both in terms of availability of family information and making the connection before the youth is damaged by years of changing placement and separation from family.



Patti Renfro, Family Search and Engagement coordinator and trainer at Catholic Community Services in Vancouver, Washington, teaches the importance of family connections as a source of stability and support for all phases of life, not just childhood. She recognizes that while family finding isn't easy, it is a worthwhile component of the concurrent planning process:

Family information is critical for the care of a child, yet we tend to use it as a last resort (and often begrudgingly) because it's extra work. We need to look at our current practices and ask ourselves, are we doing what is truly best for this child, or are we simply meeting requirements?

Finally, the most powerful statements about the success of the Family Finding model come from young people themselves who found their families:

I never had family gatherings. I never had cousins or even a real birthday. I always wanted things like my friends had, but I never had it. Now I know I had a family all along; they just didn't know where I was...

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships (October 2004).

Additional Resources

Northern California Training Academy Center for Human Services

UC Davis Extension
University of California
1632 Da Vinci Court
Davis, CA 95618
(530) 757-8643

www.humanservices.ucdavis.edu/academy

The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare

Chadwick Center for Children and Families,
Rady Children's Hospital-San Diego
3020 Children's Way, MC 5017, San Diego, CA 92123
www.cachildwelfareclearinghouse.org

Casey Family Programs

1300 Dexter Avenue North, Floor 3
Seattle, WA 98109-3542
www.casey.org

Center for Social Services Research

School of Social Welfare, UC Berkeley
University of California
120 Haviland Hall
Berkeley, CA 94720-7400
<http://cssr.berkeley.edu>

Child Welfare Information Gateway

Children's Bureau/Administration for
Children and Families
1250 Maryland Avenue, SW, Eighth floor
Washington, D.C. 20024
www.childwelfare.gov

National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement

Institute for Child and Family Policy
Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service
University of Southern Maine
PO Box 9300, 34 Bedford Street
Portland, ME 04104-9300
<http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids>

The National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning

Hunter College School of Social Work
129 East 79th Street
New York, NY 10075
www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp

ANNOUNCEMENTS

"Communities of Practice" for Child Welfare Leaders

October 13, 2009, 10 a.m.-3 p.m.

Putah Creek Lodge, UC Davis

January 2010—details TBA

April 2010—detail TBA

Enhancing Outcomes in Dependency Cases through Effective Courtroom Advocacy

Sponsored by the Northern Academy, Administrative Office of the Courts and the McGeorge School of Law
Thursday, August 6, 2009, 8 a.m.-5 p.m.

(Repeat session) Friday, August 7, 2009, 8 a.m.-5 p.m.
3200 5th Ave., Sacramento, CA 95817

Family Finding: Family Search and Engagement

Details TBA

For details of all upcoming classes and events, check the Academy's website
www.humanservices.ucdavis.edu/academy/

**We want to
hear from you**

*We are always looking for
contributors to our newsletter.
Please let us know if you have an
article, tip or valuable resource to
be included in a future issue.*



In Our Next Issue

Look for more articles, research,
success stories and resources in our next
issue of **Reaching Out**.
The next issue will focus on fatherhood.

About the Northern California Training Academy

As part of the Center for Human Services at UC Davis Extension, the Northern California Training Academy provides training, technical assistance and consultation for 29 Northern California counties. The counties include rural and urban counties with various training challenges for child welfare staff. The focus on integrated training across disciplines is a high priority in the region. This publication is supported by funds from the California Department of Social Services.

About The Center for Human Services

The Center for Human Services at UC Davis Extension began 30 years ago as a partnership between the University of California, Davis and state government to address the needs of rural counties in developing skills for their social workers. Through professional training, consultation and research, the Center has grown to serve human services organizations and professionals throughout California and across the nation in such practice areas as child welfare, tribal social services, probation, developmental disabilities and other mental health issues, early childhood education, adult protective services, public assistance eligibility, corrections and more.

Northern California Training Academy

UC Davis Extension
University of California
1632 Da Vinci Court
Davis, CA 95618

Phone: (530) 757-8643

Fax: (530) 752-6910

Email: academy@unexmail.ucdavis.edu

Web: <http://humanservices.ucdavis.edu/academy>

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