Achieving Permanency for Children:

Timely Adoption Practices in Child Welfare Services

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Executive Summary

Purpose of this Review

The driving philosophy of child welfare practices is to achieve permanency, safety and well being for ALL children involved with child welfare agencies. To better support these outcomes, specific laws have been instituted to ensure that child welfare services are meeting the aforementioned goals. Pursuant to State Law (Assembly Bill 636, Steinberg, Ch. 678, Statutes of 2001), effective January 2004, a new Child Welfare Services Outcome and Accountability System began operation in California, referred to as the California Child and Family Services Review (C-CFSR). This system was developed in accordance with the provisions of WIC §10601.2 and requires that outcome-based reviews include, at the minimum, a core set of outcomes tied to the fundamental responsibility of Child Welfare Services (CWS) to drive its system. The outcomes are defined in terms of safety, permanency and well-being, as are the outcomes used in the C-CSFR. One of these outcomes is achieving timely adoptive practices, such as timely finalization of adoptions. To assist with the process of achieving this outcome, the present report provides a review of the literature of the characteristics, processes, programs and services related to timely adoptive practices within child welfare. It is hoped that such a review will also better inform and guide practices within child welfare services, such as Peer Quality Case Reviews, by providing some research and general standards to support consistency across agencies.

Method

Information for this review was collected from both academic literature and target searches on the World Wide Web. The following search databases were explored: Academic Search Premier, Applied Social Science Index and Abstracts, PsychINFO, Sociological Abstracts, FirstSearch, CSA Illumina and Electronic Collections Online. These databases were selected to locate peer-reviewed literature.

Results

The review found that there is little in the literature that aids in the endeavor of identifying the mechanisms, programs and services that are successful in achieving

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timely adoptive practices for children involved with Child Welfare Services, especially for achieving timely adoptive placements. The majority of the existing literature has looked at factors or characteristics that are associated with timely adoptive finalization but not at the reasons for why these factors are related to one another. Differentiating between timely adoptive placements and timely adoptive finalization appears to be an important focus as recent research (McDonald et al., 2007) suggests that characteristics are differently related to these adoptive outcomes for children involved with child welfare services.

Overall, as was consistent with one key article, it was found that (as is commonly found in child welfare research and practices) the following broad categories affect timely adoptive practices (both timely adoptive placements and timely adoptive finalization) (McDonald, Press, Billings, & Moore, 2007):

- Child Characteristics
- Adoptive Family Characteristics
- Biological Family Characteristics
- The Type of Abuse and/or Neglect Experienced by the Child
- The Placement History of the Child
- Characteristics of the Case Worker
- Court System and Community Factors

Additionally, limited research suggests the need to identify how these factors interact and combine to influence timely adoption outcomes.

Discussion and Recommendations

This report ends with a discussion of some of the promising practices and programs that may assist in achieving timely adoptive practices within child welfare agencies. There is extremely limited research empirically evaluating practices and models that contribute to timely adoptive placements and finalizations of adoptions. Therefore, some promising practices are offered along with some suggested research questions to better inform these practices and services aimed at supporting timely adoption practices.

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Purpose of this Review

The purpose of this literature review is to provide and bring an understanding of the factors and practices in the field of Child Welfare Services (CWS) that impact timely adoption placements. Included in this review are also factors and services that affect timely adoption finalization as the majority of research in CWS has focused on this outcome. Thus, for the purposes of this review, the focus is on predictors or factors associated with *timely adoption placements* and *timely adoption finalization*. While timely adoptive placements and timely finalization of adoptions share some of the same influential factors, the available literature suggests that some factors and processes differentially affect these outcomes. In addition to understanding the factors that impact timely adoption practices, promising practices for facilitating timely adoptions are also discussed. Finally, due to the limited empirical and rigorously evaluated research in this focus area of child welfare services, recommendations and directions for future research are discussed. It is hoped that such a review will aid in improving services to families, generate more research and innovative thinking and assist with meeting mandatory outcome measures (e.g., facilitating the Peer Quality Review Process).

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Introduction

The *Adoption and Safe Families Act* of 1997 was set in place to enact policies and outcome measures with the goals of having States ensure timely permanent placements for children in foster care. While family reunification is the preferred goal, in many cases such a goal cannot be attained or is not in the best interest of the child. Therefore, to mitigate a child growing up in foster care, adoption can be a primary way for ensuring that children achieve permanency (Hannett, 2007). One of the federal ASFA child welfare performance indicators is the "length of time to achieve adoption," which is defined as the percent of children exiting to finalized adoptions in less than 24 months. The federal standard is 32%. While the ultimate goal is to achieve finalized placements, such as adoption finalization, it is also important to look at the process leading up to this outcome, such as the time to adoptive placements.

Child Welfare Reporting Standards

Pursuant to State Law (Assembly Bill 636, Steinberg, Ch. 678, Statutes of 2001), effective January 2004, a new Child Welfare Services Outcome and Accountability System began operation in California, referred to as the California Child and Family Services Review (C-CFSR). This system was developed in accordance with the provisions of WIC §10601.2 and requires that outcome-based reviews include, at the minimum, a core set of outcomes tied to the fundamental responsibility of Child Welfare Services (CWS) to drive its system. The outcomes are defined in terms of safety, permanency and well-being, as are the outcomes used in the C-CSFR. In addition to the outcomes measured by the federal government in its review of California's child welfare system, there is a comprehensive list of enhanced outcomes to measure the performance of each county's Child Welfare Department.

Of importance to this review are the core set of outcomes related to adoption practices and their importance for placement stability and permanence. The following reported outcomes are for July 1, 2007, to June 30, 2008, and refer to the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs).

- **Measure C2.1 Adoption within 24 months (exit cohort):** "Of all children discharged from foster care to a finalized adoption during the year, what percent were discharged in less than 24 months from the date of the latest

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removal from home?" The national goal is to achieve 36.6%. In California, out of 7, 685 children, 2, 273 or 29.6% of children who exited to adoption were adopted within 24 months. This is 7% below the national standard.

- **Measure C2.2 Median time to adoption (exit cohort):** "Of all children discharged from foster care to a finalized adoption during the year, what was the median length of stay (in months) from the date of latest removal from home until the date of discharge to adoption?" The national goal is to attain 2 years and 3.3 months. In California, the median months in care for children exiting to adoption are 2 years and 6.4 months.

- **Measure C2.3 Adoption within 12 months (17 months in care):** "Of all children in foster care for 17 continuous months or longer on the first day of the year, what percent were discharged to a finalized adoption by the last day of the year?" The national goal is 22.7%. In California, of the 32, 688 children who were in foster care for 17+ months, a total of 5, 650 or 17.3% were adopted in the last day of the year.

- **Measure C2.4 Legally free within 6 months (17 months in care):** "Of all children in foster care for 17 continuous months or longer and not legally free for adoption on the first day of the year, what percent became legally free within the next 6 months?" The national goal is 10.9%. In California, from July 2, 2007, to December 31, 2007, a total of 6.2% of children were legally free within 6 months.

- **Measure C2.5 Adoption within 12 months (legally free):** "Of all children in foster care who became legally free for adoption during the year, what percent were then discharged to a finalized adoption in less than 12 months." In California, from July 1, 2006, to June 30 2007, a total of 57% of children who were legally free during the year were adopted in less than 12 months.

- (Needell et al., (2009). *Child Welfare Services Reports for California*. Retrieved 01/12/09, from University of California at Berkeley Center for Social Services Research website. URL: http://cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb_childwelfare.)

Importance of Permanency for Children

As stated previously, the above measures were instituted to ensure that children experience permanency and placement stability. It is well known in the literature that maintaining placement stability is an important focus for child welfare. The experience of placement _instability_ can adversely affect children. One formative study found that 33 children who experienced multiple foster placements during

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infancy and toddlerhood and who were then later adopted evidenced poorer inhibitory control abilities and higher levels of caregiver-rated oppositional behavior at ages five and six compared to both non-adopted and adopted children who had experienced one placement movement (Lewis, Dozier, Ackerman, & Sepulveda-Kozakowski, 2007). These results held after controlling for a host of risks such as prenatal drug exposure. While this study included a small sample of children, it exemplifies the importance of placing children into stable placements as soon as possible, such as in a pre-adoptive home.

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Methodology

Literature was reviewed and acquired using the following search databases: Academic Search Premier, Applied Social Science Index and Abstracts, PsychINFO, Sociological Abstracts, FirstSearch, CSA Illumina, Electronic Collections Online and used the following search terms, "timely adoptive placement," "adoption finalization," "timely adoptive permanence," "permanency," "child welfare system," "foster care," "promising practices" and "evaluation." These databases were selected to locate peer-reviewed literature. Additionally, an iterative process was used in that the results or discussions from one search were used for further searches based on additional references or key words.

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Findings

There is limited research that examines timely adoptive *placements* and timely adoptive *finalizations* as separate outcomes. Making this distinction in both research and in practice is important as it appears that some factors and processes differentially impact timely adoptive placements and timely adoptive finalizations. One study that was methodologically well-designed (McDonald, Press, Billings, & Moore, 2007) found (as is commonly found in child welfare research and practices) that the following broad categories affect timely adoptive practices:

- Child Characteristics
- Adoptive Family Characteristics
- Biological Family Characteristics
- The Type of Abuse and/or Neglect Experienced by the Child
- The Placement History of the Child
- Characteristics of the Case Worker
- Court System and Community Factors

The McDonald et al. (2007) study consisted of a final sample of 2,279 children residing in Oklahoma (1999-2001) and defined their study's outcome variable as "achievement of timely adoption for children who could not be reunified with their family of origin." They further separated their analyses by "timely adoptive placement" and "finalization of adoption." This well thought out and statistically designed study found that 25% of the children had not achieved timely adoption placement and about 40% had not achieved timely adoptive finalization after more than three years. Due to the scant literature separating timely adoptive permanence into the two aforementioned outcomes, the majority of this empirical review integrates the available literature with the findings for the McDonald et al. (2007)[1] article. While this study is a useful starting point in breaking apart the complexities of timely adoption practices, more research is needed to ensure that the following findings are consistent when examined among other groups of individuals.

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[1] The additional research that either supports the McDonald et al. (2007) study is explicitly stated. Thus, when a finding is related and does not include a citation it is in reference to the McDonald et al. (2007) study.

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Timely Adoptive Placement

- **Child Characteristics**

    In looking at child characteristics as predictors of timely adoptive placements, the results revealed that the older the child was at first removal, the less likely he/she was to reach a placement in a timely manner. Specifically, McDonald et al. (2007) found that children under the age of 2 years were four times more likely to achieve timely adoptive placement as compared to children who were 12 years of age or older at the time of their first removal into child welfare services. Additionally, white children were 31% more likely to be placed in adoptive homes than nonwhite children with African-American children being 24% less likely to receive timely adoptive placements than non African-American children.

    With regard to mental and behavioral issues, children with an emotional or mental disability are less likely to reach a timely adoptive placement as were children with a medical diagnosis. In the McDonald et al. (2007) study, both the child's gender and the presence of a visual or hearing impairment were not related to a timely adoptive placement.

- **Type of Abuse/Neglect**

    With relation to the type of abuse/neglect that resulted in removal, the finding was that children removed due to sexual abuse moved more slowly toward an adoptive placement. Additionally, removal due to physical abuse or because of parental alcohol abuse was also related to a decreased likelihood of achieving a timely adoption placement.

- **Placement History**

    Placement history was also related to a timely adoptive placement with children who experienced multiple placements in foster care being less than half as likely to achieve a timely adoptive placement.

- **Biological Family Characteristics**

    Children with parents who relinquished their parental rights were more than 3 times more likely to achieve a timely adoptive placement

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and children who had unmarried birth parents were significantly more likely to move toward an adoption placement than those from unmarried couple birth families.

- **Caseworker Characteristics/Beliefs**

  Though not empirically validated, one possible contributing factor to timely adoptive placement are the beliefs that caseworkers hold concerning the suitability of nontraditional family structures. Holding such beliefs may limit the availability of needed adoptive homes and thus hinder the goal for timely adoptive placements. For example, one study of New York caseworkers found that 35% of workers believed that placement in single-parent homes is not suitable. Other potential beliefs for agencies to explore that can impact timely adoptive placements are beliefs concerning gay/lesbian individuals or couples, adoptive parents being of differing ethnicity or adoptive parents who live in other counties or states. Addressing these concerns may lead to increased potential for available adoptive families.

- **Adoptive/Foster Family Characteristics**

  The adoptive family characteristic related to timely adoptive placements was having a child placed in foster homes headed by married couples (being 3 times more likely) than female headed foster homes.

While the above factors relate to "timely adoptive placement," McDonald et al. (2007) found that some factors related differently to timely adoptive finalization, which has been the focus for the majority of the available research. The following section lists these factors and integrates additional findings.

Timely Adoptive Finalization

- **Child Characteristics**

  In regard to child characteristics influencing timely finalizations of adoption, age is a predominant factor. Previous research consistently reports that children of older ages are much less likely to be adopted (Kirton, Beechman, & Ogilvie, 2006; Snowden, Leon, & Sieracki, 2008). For example, one study found that children over the age of 11.7 years were significantly less likely to be adopted than children under the age

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of 11.7 years (Snowden et al., 2008). While it was found that *younger children* reached an adoptive *placement* more quickly, children 12 years of age and older were 6 times more likely to reach adoptive *finalization*.

Prior research finds that similarly with timely adoption placement, children with emotional, behavioral, and/or medical problems and children with learning and physical disabilities experience delayed placement permanence such as adoption finalization (Avery, 2000; McDonald & Parry, 1996). While gender was not found to statistically relate to timely adoption placement or finalization in the McDonald et al. (2007) study, previous research has found that male children tend to remain in foster care longer than female children (Avery, 2000; Kemp & Bodonyi, 2000) and are less likely to achieve timely adoptive finalizations.

- **Type of Abuse/Neglect**

    Similar to timely adoption placement, children removed from the home due to sexual abuse are the least likely to achieve timely adoption finalization (McDonald et al., 2007; McDonald et al., 2002). A recent study found that children with pre-adoptive child sexual abuse histories had increased odds of experiencing four or more moves, a greater likelihood for experiencing adoptive disruptions and were more likely to experience inconsistent parental commitment (Nalavaney, Scott, Howard, & Smith, 2008).

- **Placement History**

    While children who had experienced multiple placements after being removed progressed more slowly to an adoptive *placement*, these children were more likely to experience a timely finalization of adoption compared to children who had experienced fewer placements (McDonald et al., 2007).

- **Adoptive/Foster Family Characteristics**

    Children who had resided in single female-headed foster homes experienced adoptive placements more slowly compared to children who had been in married couple foster homes, but children from single-headed foster homes moved more quickly to adoption

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finalization once the adoption was put into place (McDonald et al., 2007).

- **Characteristics/Beliefs of the Caseworker**

   Previous research has found that caseworkers without social work degrees (because of less knowledge and resources to effectively coordinate services) (Albers et al., 1993), caseworkers with higher caseloads (Potter & Klien-Rothschild, 2002) and having negative attitudes about the adoptability of children (Avery, 2000; McDonald & Parry, 1996) were all related to timely adoption finalization. Caseworkers who believed that a child was not adoptable tended to experience significant delays in placing the child for adoption. One study found that 41% of caseworkers of children waiting for adoption in New York State believed that children in their care were not adoptable (Avery, 1999). Some of the attributing reasons for these children not being adoptable were due to their age (being older than 9 years) or because of their special needs, such as significant behavior problems.

- **System Level Factors**

   In relation to system level factors, it was found that children who were eligible for federal assistance (Medicaid and IV-E Adoption Assistance) were more than twice as likely to reach adoption finalization. This was also true for timely adoptive placements with children eligible for Title IV-A (TANF) funds being six times more likely to reach timely adoptive placements than those children who were not (McDonald et al., 2007).

Contextual Influences of Timely Adoption Practices

Another important influence of timely adoptive practices is the context in which these independent variables operate and the different effects that result when looked at interactively (Snowden et al., 2008). For example, when looked at as main effects, Hispanic children are more likely to experience both timely adoption placements and finalization as compared to children of other ethnicities. However, Snowden et al. (2008) found that children who were over the age of 11.7 years at the time of their removal and who lived with a Hispanic or multiracial unmarried foster parent were the MOST likely to remain in foster care. Thus, Hispanic children who are of older

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ages and placed with an unmarried foster parent are the most likely not to experience timely adoptive placements or finalizations. While limited to one study, these findings exemplify the importance of conducting further research and understanding the interaction of characteristics in impacting permanency for children.

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Best Practices for Achieving Timely Adoptive Placements/Finalizations

There is extremely limited research empirically evaluating practices and models that contribute to timely adoptive placements and finalizations of adoptions. Thus, the following section provides some suggested and promising practices for children involved with child welfare services. Promising practices/approaches means that there is some evidence of effectiveness through the experiences of key stakeholders (e.g., families, youth, providers, administrators) and there is some supporting outcome data; however, there is not conclusive evidence that the practice is empirically effective in meeting the stated outcomes (e.g., timely finalization of adoptions). This is in contrast to evidence-based practices that show effectiveness through "carefully controlled scientific studies," and there is ample evidence to suggest that the practice can be generalized and is shown to be effective in meeting stated objectives and/or outcomes.

A useful resource that lists some of these practices for achieving timely adoption finalization in more detail is a training module offered for free from Results-Oriented Management in Child Welfare from The University of Kansas, 2002, 2003, at: http://www.rom.ku.edu

Best Practices for Adoptive Placements

Concurrent Planning: Concurrent Planning involves a process of working toward reunification with the birth parents (caregivers) while simultaneously establishing an alternative permanent placement. It is expected that the practice of concurrent planning will expedite adoptive placements, especially for younger children (D'Andrade, Frame, & Berrick, 2006). While concurrent planning is viewed by caseworkers as moving more quickly to permanency, the practice can also create an inherent conflict in creating a plan to reunite the child with the birth parents and at the same time working on an alternative plan. However, knowing in advance the child's *potential* adoptive placement may expedite the child receiving a timely adoptive placement.

One study conducted out of New York City's Children' Aid Society found that concurrent planning was associated with "timely case resolution within 12 months" (25% of children were adopted by foster parents) (Children's Aid

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Society, 1993). However, these were nonprofit agencies and had very controlled caseloads with small numbers of children. Thus there is some question as to how these results extend to CWS (public agencies). Most of the research examining concurrent planning's relationship to adoptive practices has focused on the finalization of adoptions as the outcome. The one study that did look at timely adoption placements found that concurrent planning for a group of 24 children in London was related to significantly faster permanent family placements and significantly fewer moves when compared to two traditional adoption team approaches. However, this study was confounded because the group of children who received concurrent planning were significantly younger and research finds that younger children are more likely to be adopted or attain a permanent placement sooner than older children (Monck, Reynolds, & Wigfall, 2004). Therefore, more research is needed to understand how concurrent planning, when implemented in public agencies such as child welfare and probation, relates to timely adoptive placements. In theory, concurrent planning is an effective method, but more research is needed before it can be seen as an evidence-based practice. Also, more research is needed to understand how the implementation (in its varied ways) is impacting child and family outcomes, such as adoptive practices.

Address Case Worker Concerns: One contributing reason that younger children have an increased probability of being adopted is partly attributed to case workers having a greater interest in finding adoptive placements for younger children (Connell, Katz, Saunders, & Tebes, 2006). Agencies need to engage in open discussions concerning caseworkers' beliefs about the adoptability of children and the suitability of homes in order to achieve better outcomes in attaining timely adoptive placements. Future research is needed to ascertain if such agency dialogues lead to increased timely adoptive placements.

Improve Recruitment of Adoptive Families: Though not rigorously and empirically supported as a practice leading to increased timely adoptive placements, recruitment efforts such as media outreach, adoption parties and photo listings may provide for more suitable adoptive families and thus more adoptive placements. One program that has attained some success in recruitment efforts is the Virginia based project, "Strategies for Recruitment and Retention of Foster Care Families" (Rodwell & Biggerstaff, 1993).

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Best Practices for Adoptive Finalization

Concurrent Planning: Concurrent Planning when implemented effectively can serve as an effective way for reducing the time to adoption finalization. One of the most recent empirical studies looking at concurrent planning as a public agency practice was conduced in 2006 with 6 California counties and found that 1) the delivery and timing of primary concurrent planning practices were inconsistent and 2) both quantitative and qualitative data revealed that concurrent placement planning (when it did occur) typically occurred when parents were in the process of terminating their parental rights. Thus, this study indicates that concurrently planning as it was practiced in 2006 (and few years earlier) was not being implemented as the model intended (D'Andrade, Frame, & Berrick, 2006).

Thus, for both timely adoption finalization and placements, the practice of concurrent planning as practiced in public agencies is in need of improvements. Research finds, such as the Kentucky Adoptions Opportunities Project (2002), that greater training and understanding was needed for using concurrent planning appropriately in order to expedite permanency planning (Martin et al., 2002). Additionally, the following factors are argued as necessary components for successful implementation of concurrent planning (Frame, Berrick, & Coakley, 2006): 1) A pro-concurrent planning philosophy permeating the child welfare agency, 2) concurrent planning is actively promoted in the juvenile court, 3) formal systems or mechanisms are in place to actively encourage concurrent planning, ensuring that it occurs in a timely fashion, 4) the Child Welfare and Adoption Units are well-integrated, 5) Child Welfare Workers and Supervisors actively embrace and apply concurrent planning principles in their work, 6) an adequate number of concurrent planning families are available to provide concurrent placements, 6) birth parents are provided with necessary services in a timely fashion, and 7) an adequate number of concurrent placement families are available to provide concurrent placements. A worthwhile endeavor for future research is to understand how individually and collectively each of the above elements for successful implementation of concurrent planning relates to timely adoption practices.

Consider Open Adoptions: Especially for youth, one way to achieve timely adoption finalization is to maintain some form of connectedness to the child's

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family of origin. This may help the child to feel secure and alleviate any possible guilt. It is important to remember that the child's mental health and psychological well-being are also important for a child's well-being. Though not longitudinally studied, there is some suggestive evidence that containing a negative image of birth parents can contribute to later emotional and identity problems, and, adoptees with closed adoptions were linked to greater use of mental health services during adolescence as compared to peers who were adopted during a period of open adoptions (Berry, 1993).

Address Issues of Transracial Adoptions: One issue, found in the Adoptions Institute study (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2008), is that the racial and cultural interests for African American children who are involved with foster care are minimized and not protected when they are adopted by caregivers who do not represent the racial and ethnic backgrounds of the children they are adopting. The Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 (MEPA, appended in 1996) was instituted to ensure that a child's foster or adoptive placement could not be denied because of race, color or national origin, and it required state agencies to make concerted efforts to recruit foster and adoptive parents who represented the racial and ethnic backgrounds of the children in foster care.

Though the intention of MEPA was instituted with the goal of having permanency for children involved with child welfare services, there are some identified issues/concerns that need to be addressed when children are placed in a transracial adoptive home (The Evan B. Donaldson Adption Institute, 2008) to ensure that these adoptive placements become timely adoptive finalizations. The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (2008) report found that since the enactment of MEPA there has been an increasing rise in transracial adoptions (from 17.2% in 1996 to 20.1% in 2003), but this increase has not resulted in increased achievement of timely permanency for African American children. In fact, the adoption rate of Black children (and Native American) continues to be lower than other racial/ethnic groups (U.S. GAO, 2007) with African American children remaining in foster care an average of 9 months longer than White children (U.S. GAO, 2007).[2]

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[2] It must be noted that these findings are presented as main effects. When looked at interactively as Snowden et al. (2008) did in their analyses, the findings of the U.S. GAO, 2007 report may different.

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Research finds that the following concern/issues should be addressed to facilitate more positive and healthier adoptive caregiver-child interactions:

- Address transracial adoptees' confusion over ethnic identity as previous research finds that such confusion is related to behavior problems and distress (Cederblad, Hook, Irhammar, & Mercke, 1999). While the relationship between these factors was not examined as a casual relationship, i.e., that lack of ethnic pride causes depression, the findings highlight the importance of a child having an ethnic identify and a sense of belonging. While the Cederblad et al. (1999) study was conducted with internationally adopted children, it can be expected that any adolescent who does not perceive to have an ethnic/racial identity is likely to experience distress. One way to support a timely adoption finalization and ensure a stable home for a child is to provide long term support to a family who is involved with a transracial adoption. Often identity issues, such as identifying with one's ethnic identity, may not surface until adolescence.

Post-Adoptive Placement Services: There are limited studies that have examined the efficacy of these services in contributing to placement stability for children (Groze et al., 1991; Lenerz, 2000; Avery, 2004). Some programs that have evaluated post-adoptive services are a) the Casey Family Programs Post-adoption Service program, b) the Oregon Post-adoption Family Therapy project, c) the Iowa Post-adoption Resources for Training, Networking and Evaluation Services program, d) the New York TANF-funded Post-adoption Services, and e) the Illinois Adoption Preservation program. The result of these studies was that the most requested services were counseling, educational services, community services and mental/medical health services, with most families seeking out services for child-focused issues/concerns. In two of these studies, families typically did not seek out post-adoptive services for 5 (in the Casey Family Services) and 7.3 years (in the Illinois Adoption Preservation study). Thus, the need for post-adoptive services extends beyond the post-two years of adoption. The following lists some specific concerns to target with respect to post-adoptive services. As discussed earlier in this review, some of these concerns have been linked in the literature to failed finalizations of adoptions and placement instability.

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Child Focused Problems

- *Prenatally drug exposed*: Provide supports for children prenatally substance exposed during the post-adoptive placement stage to ensure placement stability. In one study it was found that prenatally substance exposed adopted children were slightly more likely to have an increased incidence of behavior problems compared to adopted children who were not prenatally substance exposed (Crea, Guo, Barth, & Brooks, 2008). Therefore, adoptive families should be provided with the appropriate expectations for their children and told of possible difficulties in facilitating their child's development (e.g., learning difficulties) as well as given access to available supports if needed.

- *Services and supports for issues of pre-adoptive child sexual abuse (CSA):* As stated earlier, children who have pre-adoptive CSA are at a greater risk of experiencing more placement moves, adoption disruptions and inconsistent parental commitment (Nalavany et al., 2008). Thus, families adopting children with pre-adoptive CSA histories will need specific interventions and services to support them in providing these children with stable homes. Some available fact sheets that address a number of concerns/issues for adopting children who have involvement in foster care can be retrieved from:
    - The *Minnesota Adoption Support Preservation* website: http://www.mnasap.org/information/factsheets.aspx
    - Utah's Child and Family Services Adoption Connection: https://www.utdcfsadopt.org/sexual_abuse.shtml

Types of Post-Adoptive Services and Programs

Post-Adoption Intensive Family Preservation Services (IFPS): The goal of IFPS is to provide many different services to families who are at risk of experiencing out-of-home placement (Kinney, Haapala, & Booth, 1991). Typically the services provided are home based, available 24 hours a day, are intensive with services ranging from 5-20 hours per week, include both concrete and therapeutic services and are short term.

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In a recent study, the effectiveness of IFPS in Missouri was examined among a sample of 99 children who consisted of (Mean age = 15.34 years, range 5-21 years) 53 females and 40 males with 49% being of Euro-American and 43%being of African-American ethnic origin (Berry, Propp, & Martens, 2006). Even though only 76% of the sample remained in tact at 6 months, thus limiting the variability, the results still contributed some helpful information.

In this study, two different time points were included, 6 months and 12 months, in understanding predictors of families remaining together after receiving post-adoptive IFPS. Including these two different time points was important as various factors were differentially related to the outcome depending upon the time examined. Specifically, at 6 months post IFPS, the study found that the greatest influence of a child remaining in the adoptive home was the initial reason for placement, with those children being placed because of suspicion for child abuse and neglect being less likely to remain in the home at 6 months. Additional contributors for children being less likely to remain in the post-adoptive placement was having a primary parent working full time and a child being of African-American ethnicity. Service characteristics (problems addressed and number of days receiving IFPS) were not significantly related to a child remaining in the adoptive home at 6 months.

However, at 12 months post IFPS, service characteristics were significantly related to children remaining in their post-adoptive placement and were greater influences of timely adoption finalization than child and family factors (e.g., parent employment, child's age, ethnicity, etc.). In particular, a significant predictor of a child remaining in the home post IFPS was receiving more days of service, addressing issues of child abuse and providing services for child behavioral issues.

Support for children over the age of 14: As discussed earlier, older children are less likely to be adopted, with the likelihood for being adopted decreasing as age increases (Connell, Katz, Saunders, & Tebes, 2006). Additionally, older children who are adopted have been identified as having specific concerns that contribute to difficulties in

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their reaching finalization in their adoptions. One common difficulty in achieving timely adoption finalization for older children is their expressed opposition to being adopted. Though there is limited evidence-based practice for assisting families who are adopting older children, some promising practices are using lifebooks or using family group decision-making in order to assist youth in understanding and accepting the adoption and their issues of grief, loss and possible feelings of betrayal. When appropriate and viable, open adoptions for older children may also contribute to timely adoptive finalization.

A useful resource that specifically addresses adopting older children is a booklet, "Adopting the Older Child," by Candace Wheeler. This booklet addresses some common issues between adoptive families and older children such as setting limits, dealing effectively with grieving, effective communication and typical behavioral issues.

Expediting Approval of Foster and Adoptive Parents: Efforts are currently made to expedite the placement of foster children in permanent homes (The PEW Commission on Children in Foster Care, 2006). It is not uncommon for an adoptive family to wait 6 months to a year before going to court to finalize an adoption (Rampage, Eovaldi, Ma, & Weigel-Foy, 2003). To ensure more timely adoptive finalizations, the approval process is being expedited for parents who want to adopt mixed-race children, older children or children with significant disabilities (Smith & Howard, 1999). While there are some concerns in expediting approval (for example, not affording enough time to successfully locate a birth father), it appears that such practices are contributing to more timely adoption finalizations. In many instances, the children who are being adopted are those children who have been in the foster care for a number of years.

In a random controlled study, a New York City adoption project that sought to change the existing family court procedures to expedite the time between termination of parental rights and adoption finalization revealed that filing adoption petitions at the time of the termination of parental rights led to children be adopted in significantly shorter periods of time as compared to those children who received the usual procedures (Festinger & Pratt, 2002). Though this study did not compare outcomes on measures of child well-being, the results do highlight how filing petitions at the time of terminating parental

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rights keeps cases on the calendar, in some instances, of the same judge contributing to timely finalizations of adoptions.

Increase Foster Care Per Diem and Adoption Subsidy Rates: In some states, public subsidies that partially support the needs of children have enabled foster parents to adopt foster children by maintaining the maintenance payments that a foster parent receives when they become foster parents (The PEW Commission on Children in Foster Care, 2004). However, these public subsidies have been criticized for applying only to income-eligible families. The PEW Commission recommends that Children in Foster Care (2004) be offered federal adoption assistance under Title IV-E so that "every child who experiences abuse and neglect…secures a permanent family" (p. 21).

Cultural Competency: In carrying out adoption practices to lead to timely permanency outcomes, it is important to be culturally aware and sensitive. In one project termed *Families Para Ninos* that was funded by the Federal Adoption Opportunities grant, efforts to provide properly translated materials, bilingual staff, and foster/adoptive parenting training curriculas in Spanish for a media adoptive family recruitment campaign led to an increased number of Hispanic/Latino children placed in adoption from foster care (Standford et al, 2004).

- A useful resource and guide for providing services and supports for Hispanic/Latino families is the, "Answering the Call: Neustra Familia, Neustra Cultura: Promoting and Supporting Latino Families in Adoption and Foster Care"(Hutchinson, Ortega, & Quintanilla, 2008). This guide was made after the AdoptUsKids mandate to have national television, radio, print and Internet advertising campaign in Spanish which resulted in 12, 959 initial calls from Spanish speaking prospective adoptive parents during the first three years of the campaign. Thus, this guide was made for foster parent recruiters, trainers and caseworkers to promote cultural sensitivity and guidance when working with Latino populations.

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Recommendations and Future Directions

Given that the research looking at factors associated with and practices for promoting timely adoption placements and finalizations is limited and consists of promising practices, formal evaluation efforts are needed. There are many important questions in need of answers regarding the process in which these services are delivered, the efficacy in which these services are delivered, the satisfaction of families and of great importance, understanding the process for how particular factors come to influence timely adoption practices. An empirical approach to these questions will improve and refine the services currently being provided in efforts of timely adoptive placements and finalization. Agencies will learn a great deal more by identifying the specific characteristics of children and families and how these characteristics along with service characteristics interact to preserve families and create stability for children. One important point of this review, and in child welfare services in general, is that "the client is neither the child nor the parents but rather the relationship" (Katz). Thus, services and supports should be examined in the context of the relationship with the goal of improving and enhancing important family relationships in order to improve timely adoptive practices.

Some suggested questions to pursue include the following:

- *Are diligent recruitment efforts of potential adoptive families reflecting the ethnic/racial diversity of children who need adoptive placements?*

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- A consistent finding in the literature is that African-American children are significantly less likely to achieve timely adoptive placement or timely adoptive finalization. Agencies need to examine the strengths and barriers of their efforts in promoting and retaining a sufficiently diverse group of adoptive parents.

- *What type of competency training is provided to foster care and adoption workers? How does this training impact timely adoptive practices?*

- *What services and/or supports facilitate timely adoptive practices?*

- *In what ways are child welfare, mental health and adoptive agencies collaborating around services to parents?*

- *What strategies and efforts are being implemented to find permanent families for children who have been in out-of-home care for years?*

- *How do open adoptions contribute to timely adoption finalization? In what ways do closed and open adoptions differentially affect child and family well-being (e.g., such as positive identity formation)?*

- *In what ways does the context influence timely adoption practices (e.g., foster family structure, ethnicity, age)? How do these multiple influences interact to influence adoption outcomes? In what ways do services and programs impact these interactions?*

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Conclusions

Attaining placement stability for children is an important goal for child welfare agencies. Previous research finds that young children who have experienced multiple placements are more likely to exhibit oppositional behavior (Ryan & Testa, 2005) and are at greater risk of developing poor inhibitory control skills once adopted than children who experienced a stable care-giving environment while in foster care (Lewis, Dozier, Ackerman, & Sepulveda-Kozakowski, 2007). Thus, attaining stability in placements is a worthwhile and important endeavor.

This brief review of the literature finds that some of the factors that affect timely adoption placements are different from those factors that affect timely adoption finalization. Due to these differences, though the research is limited (in many instances to one study, McDonald et al., 2007), it highlights the importance of operationalizing "adoption permanence" among these two different outcomes and not to assume that those factors that are related to timely adoption finalization are the same factors that impact timely adoption placement. Additionally, examining these factors interactively, in context, sheds more light on the issue of timely adoptive practices. For example, while in isolation, Hispanic children are more likely to experience timely adoptive placements when looked at for age and type of foster family structure (unmarried, single parent), they are the MOST likely to remain in foster care (Snowden et al., 2008).

Throughout this review, the dearth of empirically validated studies and evidence-based programs and services for achieving both timely adoptive placements and finalization was discussed. A great deal of research is needed to achieve a better understanding of the processes and characteristics that affect timely adoption outcomes and in what ways these adoption practices contribute to positive family and child outcomes. Such research is of great importance for both evaluating and improving permanency outcomes for children.

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