

Start Down the Path to Permanency

Despite many improvements made in the child welfare system in recent years, the removal of children from the care of their parents remains a significant traumatic childhood event. (Folman, 1998, p. 11). As soon as children enter care, planning for permanency needs to become a priority. The investigative work of child protective services begins the trajectory for many things that occur during ongoing efforts to assist families in reunification efforts and in establishing permanency for children. The information gathered and the relationships established when a case begins are critical. This tip sheet highlights aspects of the front end of the system that can be revised to focus on permanency from the start.

Prepare Children for Permanency – Starting at Entry

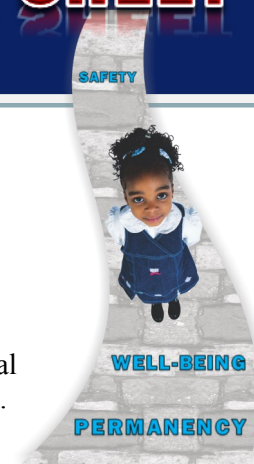
Children involved in the child welfare system face many complications, partially due to the uncertainty of their future. At the time of removal, no one knows whether the children will be either reunified with their family of origin or placed with relative caregivers or non-related foster families, or eventually adopted.

Part of preparing children for permanency involves helping them cope with the emotions and losses they experience as a result of having been abused or neglected and having been removed from the care of their birth parents. It is critical that this preparation start as soon as the children enter care. Folman studied the early reactions of children removed from the care of their parents (Folman 1998, p. 7-35). She learned that children often experience a series of traumas that are not adequately recognized or addressed. Her research offers some suggestions for minimizing the trauma and keeping children informed along the way so they are less likely to blame themselves for having been abused and removed from their family. This type of preparation is critical regardless as to whether children return home or move into another permanent living arrangement.

A tip sheet *Set Expectations* (National Resource Center for Adoption 2014), references the work of Lorrie Lutz. She describes a triangle of support around a child in care, which consists of birth families, resource (foster) families, and child welfare agencies. She encourages strong connections between all those endeavoring to help the child so that permanency efforts proceed more smoothly and with constant attention to prioritizing the child's needs.

Offer Cross Training that Facilitates and Supports Permanency

The child welfare system has typically functioned with different tasks (for example, case management of reunification efforts and preparation for termination of parental rights and adoption) performed by workers in different departments. While the distinctive functions involved in various steps in the process may support the logic of separating these functions, there are disadvantages in this approach. Research on the effectiveness of child welfare systems and opportunities for improvement has suggested minimizing the number of workers involved with a family as they move through the child welfare process and warns against the pitfalls of fragmented systems which often create confusion and frustration for families (Bass, Shields and Behrman 2004, p. 21). Foundational principles in preparing children for permanency include recognition that permanency is a process rather than a destination and that “permanency work requires time, consistency and honesty” from workers and foster/adoptive families. It also includes the understanding that permanency work is a process that “begins before placement and can extend past final adoption.” (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013). Michigan has done some innovative work around their foundational training for staff. In an effort to ensure that staff have a comprehensive understanding of their child welfare system, Michigan is looking at a different training model for staff called Continuum of Care. This model trains staff on the entire child welfare system instead of just the area that they were working.



In addition to offering cross training for staff, child welfare systems have to revise the manner in which they train foster parents. The role of foster parents has changed through the years and as a result, their training needs have also changed. Many states require foster parents to serve as a resource and guide for birth parents. Listed below are expectations for prospective foster parents in Louisiana. It provides an example of the foster parents' changing role within the child welfare system:

- Build a positive, supportive relationship with the child's family.
- Respect the child's feelings about his/her family.
- Engage the child's family in a relationship and offers the family support, encouragement and assistance.
- Serve as a teacher and mentor to the child's family.
- Transport the child and supports the visitation plan as determined by court/agency.
- Share relevant information about the child to his/her family.
- When possible, includes the family in the child's activities (Louisiana Department of Children and Families 2014).

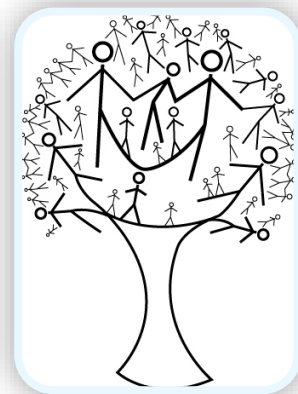
Expectations of foster parents should be clearly defined in recruitment material and in pre-service training. This may require revision of the training curriculum and screening process. Additionally, child welfare systems may want to consider offering more joint training between the critical stakeholders in the child welfare system—case managers and foster/adoptive parents. Joint training for these groups can help to establish trust and build cooperative relationships that pave the way for more consistency on behalf of the children in care (Craig-Oldsen 2003). Some of the topics related to permanency that are critical to both groups include the following:

- The tendency of children to believe they are to blame for the treatment they have experienced (Folman 1998, p. 7-35) and ways to correct this misperception.
- The need for workers, foster/adoptive parents and birth parents to provide developmentally appropriate explanations and truthful, frequent updates to children on permanency progress (Child Welfare League of America 2014) and (Barbell and Freundlich 2001).
- The value and purpose of involvement of birth families in the lives of children, both those who will be reunified with biological parent(s) and those who will be adopted or have permanent guardianship.

- The impact of trauma with an understanding that all involvement in child protection has a strong potential to be traumatic for children (Folman 1998) and information on what practices minimize trauma.
- The prevalence of multi-generational abuse and neglect.
- Practical ways to engage birth families for the benefit of the children as well as ways to assist foster/adoptive parents in learning to value birth families as an important part of children's identity and long-range stability.
- All service providers in a system of care should receive trauma-informed care training as well as information on how contact with biological families benefits children in foster care even if they are in the process of being adopted.

Recognize and Honor the Importance of Birth Family Connections

Children enter foster care with connections to their birth families. Even when maltreatment or neglect occurred, children feel attached to their parents and it is important that the love and loyalty they feel be respected. Child welfare agencies need to train staff members and foster/adoptive parents on the importance of honoring these connections and ensuring that they are maintained throughout the system of care. Honoring these connections includes everything from finding distant relatives and identifying how they can be involved with the children, even when they are not able to be the primary caretakers, to providing children with the tools and space necessary to grieve the loss of their homes, parents, and possibly siblings. Child welfare staff and foster/adoptive parents have to work together to ensure children do not feel responsible for the abuse they experienced, receive developmentally appropriate information about the child welfare system, and learn how to cope with uncertainty and stress. Child welfare systems must also plan for future needs of children, which often include recognizing and respecting the loyalty they feel toward their birth families while helping them attach to their new families, helping them believe that their new families will be lasting, and recognizing the significant need children have to learn, review, and retain their own history (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013, p. 3-5, 8-9).



One of the fundamental steps in recognizing and honoring birth family connections is gathering information when it is most easily available, maintaining it, adding to it throughout placement, and ultimately ensuring it is handed off when permanency is achieved. Child welfare systems have historically attempted this collection of information through Lifebooks, scrapbook-type records, which include narratives about how a child entered care, information known about their extended birth family, important documents, photos, records of milestones in the child's life, and journal entries made by the child with assistance from writing or drawing prompts and guidance from workers, foster/adoptive families and occasionally from birth family members (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013, p. 11-12). The Lifebook helps children develop their identity and self-esteem and provides documents children will need in adulthood, (Lutheran Social Services of Illinois, 2014).

In order to effectively gather this information, the child welfare system must establish engagement with children's parents and extended birth families. The engagement with birth parents should begin when the case is commenced. In a report by the Casey Family Foundation, Tyler Corwin states: "Strategies to improve the engagement of birth parents and families in the child welfare system include early outreach to parents; practical assistance; building supportive relationships with peers, foster parents, and child welfare workers; consulting parents in the decision-making process around service provisions; and family-centered practices" (Tyler, 2012, p. 6).

Recommendations for Engaging Birth Families

- Recruit foster/adoptive families who are willing to engage with birth families and who understand the lifelong importance of the birth families in the children's life. Training on these topics should be included in all prospective foster/adoptive parent training (Craig-Oldsen 2003, p. 1-4), (Tyler 2012, p. 1-32) and (National Resource Center for Adoption 2014).
- Consider reorganization of the child welfare team so there can be more consistency in who interacts with birth and foster/adoptive families. A casework-teaming model can increase consistency (Bass, Shields and Behrman 2004, p. 22-24).
- Provide birth parents and foster/adoptive parents with understandable information on the requirements and process for reunification, termination of parental rights, and adoption (Craig-Oldsen 2003, p. 1-4) and (Bass, Shields 2004, p. 22-24).

- Utilize developmentally appropriate interventions to reassure children, elicit their questions and concerns, and offer guidance and reassurance (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013, p. 4-5).
- Listen to and respond to needs expressed by children throughout the steps of removal, reunification, termination of parental rights, and preparation for permanency and adoption or other permanency plan (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013, p. 4-5).

Several daunting challenges have impeded efforts to gather and maintain birth family information for the benefit of children in foster care. The first is a problem with the format itself. As stated above, Lifebooks have been the primary vehicle utilized for maintaining the history and progress of children in care. Children and families do not typically have access to case records. The case records contain more detail about the reasons for placement in care, family history and the birth family's efforts toward reunification. Perhaps, the vehicle needed should be a hybrid of a Lifebook and a case record.

The second challenge is the turnover and change in case-load responsibilities for child welfare professionals. When successions of workers become responsible for tasks, the work becomes fragmented and relationships with birth families have to be reformed as each new worker comes on the scene. Multiple analyses of opportunities for improvement in child welfare recommend that systems strive to reduce turnover and reduce the number of professionals who interact with children and families from commencement to closing of a case (Bass, Shields and Behrman 2004, p. 22-24).

The third and fourth challenges are related. A physical record or Lifebook is difficult to consistently hand off during placement changes. Changes can occur with little preparation and various items get left behind. In addition, responsibility for gathering and maintaining the personal history of children is unclear in many systems of care. Workers sometimes fail to share birth family information with foster/adoptive families for a variety of reasons. If the family has primary responsibility for creating and maintaining the Lifebook, they cannot create a complete record without all the known information. Other barriers are created when workers have primary responsibility maintaining the history or Lifebook since the workers may not have access to photographs or information about daily developmental milestones and daily school progress.

The last challenge pertains to both workers and foster/adoptive families being reluctant to raise topics that appear to upset children. They may want to encourage looking forward to a new living environment free of abuse. How-

ever, until children are able to give voice to their feelings of fear, grief and loss, they may be unable to move forward (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013, p. 6-8). Along the same lines, birth parents may not want to share painful parts of their own history or their life with their children, especially in the absence of a trusting relationship with the worker or foster/adoptive parents. Workers, foster/adoptive parents, and birth parents need support in overcoming these emotional challenges so they can participate in creating a true history for the children (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013, p. 8).

There are a wide variety of tools available to provide a child with practical information (such as medical history and family-tree information), a sense of emotional connection to his or her birth family, and a record of life events that occur in foster care. There are activities foster/adoptive and birth families and children can complete together either in person or by mail, telephone or e-mail which provide information and build a feeling of connection. A list of Lifebook resources is included in the reference section of this tip sheet.

Lutheran Social Services of Illinois has prioritized Lifebooks by hiring Lifebook Specialists, who provide expertise and practical support to workers, families and children to gather information and complete journal-type activities that help children process their experiences. They train all staff in the value of Lifebooks and with commitment from administrators, workers and families, they have successfully dealt with many of the barriers described above (Lutheran Social Services of Illinois 2014).

Given the significant challenges in keeping track of belongings for a child living in foster care, one way to maintain consistency has been to have multiple copies of the information that has been gathered. The Lifebook can be scanned and stored on flash drives that are given to foster/adoptive parents and to children as they become adults and leave care. Joanne Lange, Founder and CEO of Aboutone, has developed an innovative alternative. Aboutone is a web-based product families can use to file and organize important documents. When Ms. Lange learned about the challenges many youth aging out of the child welfare system encountered in regards to not having critical documents, she founded the “communication station.” This is a web-based resource that can house important documents including the lifebook in a cloud. Ms. Lange wanted to ensure that youth had access to their medical records, school records, vital documents as well as memorabilia. This effort is in its initial stages, but it eliminates the need for any physical book or flash drive to be maintained. Material in an online file can be updated and added to by anyone who is given access to the material (Hayek 2012).

Gathering accurate and complete information gives children a sense of self. Child welfare workers, foster/adoptive families, and birth families can and should form relationships that allow them to work together to create and maintain a record that will allow children to understand what happened along their path to permanency. They can then use that information to correctly assign responsibility for the losses they experience to the adults whose behavior contributed to their circumstances. When children understand what happened and work through their emotions, they are free to love all the adults who were and who have become important to them. This allows them to move into adulthood with emotional stability (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013, p. 1-14).

Lifebook Resources

- Child Welfare Information Gateway has tips for creating Lifebooks as well as resources to purchase or download books. They list formats especially for children with special needs. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postplacement/lifebooks.cfm>
- Iowa Foster Parents and Adoption Association has Lifebook pages that can be downloaded for free. A book can also be purchased via their website at <http://www.ifapa.org>
- Lutheran Social Services of Illinois has trained all staff in the value of Lifebooks and has hired “Lifebook specialists,” who assist children and workers in completing Lifebooks. Their program utilizes the slogan “Every Child Deserves a Lifebook.” Their website provides access to several versions of their Lifebook format, My Awesome Life, and provides access to a training DVD. These items are for sale at reasonable prices. <http://www.LSSI.org>
- Washington State Department of Social and Health Services has a printable book that includes a birth family tree, a list of birth siblings, and spaces for medical and vaccination information. <http://www1.dshs.wa.gov/pdf/Publications/22-485.pdf>
- Wisconsin Foster Care and Adoption Association has a tip sheet on creating Lifebooks and links to free online resources. <http://wiadopt.org/Portals/WIAdopt/Tipsheets/Youth/LifeBooks.pdf>
- Published Lifebook formats:
 - Lieberman, Cheryl. Creating Ceremonies
 - Mooney, Jim. The Complete Lifebook Workbook
 - O’Malley, Beth. Lifebooks: Creating a Treasure for the Adopted Child
 - Probst, Cindy. Adoption Lifebook: Making Sense of the Past
 - Rees, Joy. Life Story Books for Adopted Children: A Family Friendly Approach
 - Tebos, Susan. Before You Were Mine

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*National Resource Center for Adoption, Permanency Support and Preservation Model, 2014.
Contributing Author: Susan Gardner Josephson, MA, Licensed Mental Health Counselor (Florida)*