Triple concurrent planning for long-term kinship care, short-term foster placement, and family reunification for children: practice standards from research

Concurrent planning includes contemplating all judicious 'options for permanency at the earliest conceivable point after a child's entry into care and concurrently reviewing and pursuing those options aiming to best accommodate and assist the child's needs' (Department of Health and Human Services, Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012: 1). Developed initially as a placement option in North America in the 1970s concurrent care is now used as a stream of out-of-home care (with foster care and kinship care and family reunification) in multiple countries. Although concurrent planning is regarded as the preferred placement option for children up to three years of age this model of care can be considered and implemented across age ranges and placements, dependent on family and the child and the young person's circumstances (Tilbury & Osmond, 2006). Concurrent care is regarded as a robust option for the rapid delivery of permanency and stability-centred outcomes for children and young people (Milani, 2014).

Case management method

Benefits

Concurrent permanency planning as a case management method is effective in limiting the amount of time a child is placed into foster care placement as its process involves establishing a primary permanent plan, such as family reunification, while simultaneously developing an alternative permanency plan (North Carolina DHHS, 2014).

The primary benefit of this method is to reduce short-range thinking and therefore multiple placements by avoiding time delays linked with consecutive planning. This is best done by assessing the probability of reunification at the time the child enters out-of-home care, during the intake stage, and when the likelihood of the child returning to their birth family is low, to implement a permanency plan while simultaneously providing reunification services (Tilbury & Osmond, 2006). Child welfare practice for children in out-of-home care placement has been strengthened due to concurrent planning (Schene, 2001). It is important to conduct early searches for extended family, providing outreach and support to kinship systems and extended families in making decisions about permanency (Schene, 2001). It is important that concurrent planning should first consider extended family as possible long term options (Williams, 1999; Schene, 2001). The Children and Young People Act 2008 specifically states information is needed to engage other family members to be voluntarily involved in protecting the child from birth if the child's birth family is deemed unsuitable.

Unique Planning

Concurrent care as a planning method is distinguished from other concepts by its carer to adoption method. The care and protection team work concurrently on two plans. One is for family reunification with the biological parents; and the second is a foster placement to potential adoption plan. The carers the child is placed with at the initial separation from their biological family are prepared to adopt the child if family reunification is not a viable option. Potential adoptive parents need to be equipped to handle the uncertainty (Monck et al., 2004).

Case management method

Challenges

Due to the accelerated timeframes reunification efforts may be challenged, particularly when out-of-home care agencies are not sufficiently equipped with resources to provide adequate and suitable services for the families (D'Andrade, Frame, & Berrick 2006). Despite these concerns, evaluations are lacking, and no direct evidence exists that concurrent planning jeopardises permanency outcomes, as its implementation is always at the initial phases (D'Andrade et al., 2006: 92).

A practice issue which is yet to be considered in detail in the literature is where foster carers (non-family members) are concurrent carers from the time the child comes into care then extended family become available and willing to care for the child after restoration has not been successful. By this time the child has often been placed with foster carers for considerable periods of time and child protection workers need to weigh up a number of complex factors in terms of determining the best permanent placement for the child. Whilst there is limited research detailing this unique but significant practice issue, there is a wide consensus that relatives (biological family members), 'are the preferred resource because this arrangement maintains the child's connections with their family' (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018: 1).

Emerging Themes and Issues from Research

There are multiple practice elements to consider for concurrent planning across long-term kinship care, short-term foster care, and family reunification for children in out-of-home care. The following practice elements are drawn from research and a series of case studies around concurrent planning projects. Although research into concurrent planning is relatively scarce, the following themes and issues that emerged from the case studies have been adopted to support key practice elements for practitioners in the child protection space. Factors identified that may facilitate or hinder successful implementation are also addressed. These case studies sought perspectives and experiences from children's service managers, social workers, supervisors, legal practitioners and judges. Abstracts about these studies is on page 8 of the series.

"I can see its good for the child, but…….." (Ward. 2011)

- Social workers felt powerless to argue for a solution that would be best for the child
- Existing was a lack of urgency and passion regarding the importance for a child's development of reducing delay and placing children early
- Some social workers felt the child would be confused because they wouldn't know what to call the carer
- Concern around children being with concurrent carers would influence them when they were asked what their wishes and feelings were.
- This demonstrates a misunderstanding of concurrent planning as the children involved are usually very young
- It also raises issues about understanding the child's emotional state as the case is going through the court.
- The child is in legal limbo but not an emotional one; the child cannot be held in a vacuum while the care proceedings are going on.

"Is it adoption or fostering?" (Ward, 2011)

- All respondents were concerned about the carers – including the ambivalent status of concurrency affecting the ability of the carer to attach to the child
- That concurrent carers wanting to adopt may "contaminate" the process
- That concurrent carers should be outside of the assessment process, though foster carers are within
- Some social workers argued that carers know the child best and couldn't and shouldn't be neutral.

Emerging Themes and Issues from Research

Broad philosophical support (D'Andrade, Frame, Berrick, 2006: 87)
- Across agencies current planning had comprehensive ethical and moral support
- Participants thought concurrent planning was theoretically possible
- That is was sensible to concurrently track reunification as an alternative plan
- All participants believed the method results in multiple benefits
- These benefits include increased stability and timely permanency for children; enhanced maintenance of child birth family relationships
- And a safer, more informed, motivational, comforting system for birth parents knowing their children are in a permanent home with a likelihood of long-term contact.

Limited use (D'Andrade, Frame, Berrick, 2006: 88)
- Quantitative data reveal that concurrent planning was not pervasive within child protection agencies
- Qualitative data reveal the same pattern with care and protection workers not reporting or conducting concurrent planning frequently or consistently
- Care and protection workers and court personnel identified possible reasons including concurrent planning is too emotionally overwhelming for birth parents, and that time periods for reunification were too short
- Participants expressed concern over concurrent planning may cause confusion or conflicting loyalties in children which may reduce workers efforts to try applying concurrent planning on cases.
- These concerns do have support in other literature (Meezan & Shireman, 1982; Stein, 2000; Weinberg & Katz, 1998; Alcalay, Tyebjee, Taplin, & O'Loughlin, 2002; Malm et al., 2001; Westat, 2001).

Delayed reunification prognoses and concurrent planning placements (D'Andrade, Frame, Berrick, 2006: 91)
- Reunification projections were found to be used less as a tool to target concurrent planning, and more to aid in decisions about ending reunification services or returning children home
- Quantitative data revealed that concurrent placements, when occurring, were not happening early in the case
- Qualitative data supports this finding across four of the study regions, with concurrent placement occurring late in the child welfare cases, often around the time of court hearing to terminate parental rights
- This is often cited as a strategy to reduce risks to foster adopt parent caregivers, by holding back from placing children in their homes until unsuccessful parental reunification appears certain

Emerging Themes and Issues from Research

- Apprehension was articulated by all participants, especially social workers, regarding the effect on birth parents
- Ethically the process must be seen to be fair, and parents being aware of their rights under the Human Rights Act would delay proceedings
- To uphold the rights of a family life was a strong feeling expressed in favour of the principle that children should stay with their birth parents if possible
- Birth parents' lawyers were viewed as obstructive in planning for the child, and described by workers as "playing a game"
- Issues about the neutrality of agencies was a theme, concerned around if an agency could carry out an objective assessment was doubted by some participants

Summary (D'Andrade, Frame, Berrick, 2006; Ward, 2011)

- Concurrent planning is a child centered method of placement which confirms good outcomes for children, speeds up determination of permanence and endorses good attachments (Monck, et al, 2003; Kenrick, 2009; Kenrick, 2010)
- However, these research projects have highlighted the difficulty identified by Wigfall et al (2006) in executing the method
- Previous research about concurrent planning has focused on the role of children's social workers and team managers, identified as key people as they have a significant role in decision making for the child in their role as corporate parents (Monck et al, 2003; Frame et al, 2006)
- Overall, findings suggest great uncertainty from social work practitioners about the viability of concurrent planning, and perhaps remarkably, a lack of focus on the benefits for the child.
- Concern about the rights of the parents evidently overshadowed the needs of the child.

- Kinship care assessments are now a stronger feature of care proceedings
- While consideration of family members was traditionally part of the concurrent planning system, kinship carers now have to be assessed first
- An issue to consider for concurrent planning could be, should concurrent carers be equipped for greater uncertainty, and take the child at an early interim care order stage, when a kinship care placement or residential assessment of mother and baby might still be ordered by the court?
- What about geographical separation of kinship carers?
- The child would then have its care by the concurrent carers interrupted, but if the kinship or parental placement was unsuccessful, the child would return to them
- Research indicates that the acceptance and implementation of concurrent planning is caught up in a parent-centered court process
- The human rights of the parents prevail over those of the child. The matter of a right to family life is a determined right for the parents
- Further research that accounts for the perspectives and viewpoints of children where appropriate and young people involved in planning may shift and balance the human rights considerations from the parents to the children
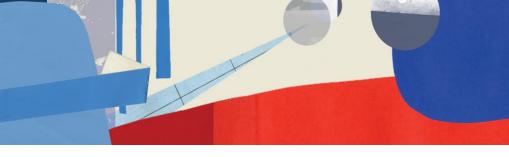
Key Research Elements to Consider

- Cultural factors and geographical separation
- Concurrent kinship carers – from entry to care
- Relationships and support systems for and between carers, birth families and children
- Early conversations with extended family
- Attachment between children and carers trying to foster
- Acknowledging and respecting attachments that have already developed between children and foster carers, when extended family becomes available

Practice Standards for Practitioners

- Ensure the person driving the project has sufficient passion to carry it through
- Are carers capable of fulfilling the complexities of concurrency? Carers will need sufficient support and training to enable them to do so
- Concurrent planning can be more emotionally difficult than fostering
- Clarity and transparency about role with birth families
- Focus on the benefits and rights of the child
- Age of the child
- The child's needs or ability
- Duration of the out-of-home placement
- Prediction for successful reunification with parents
- Availability of and transference to relatives and kin-care
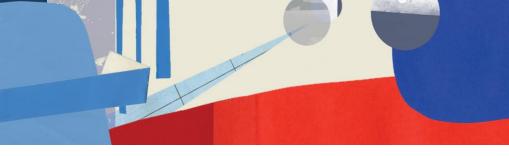- The child's interests

What we know: key points from research

Concurrent planning is a child-centered method of placement that confers good outcomes for children, speeds up determination of permanence and endorses good attachments (Kenrick, 2009; Kenrick, 2010; Monck, et al, 2003).

What we don't know: key points for future research

Concurrent planning research in Australia is scarce. Although data is available from within the UK and USA, there is a scarcity of Australian research. Furthermore, while agencies and practitioners and even the legal systems views are captured in research, children and young people's views and parents' views are absent. Capturing these views will only strengthen and enhance outcomes for families involved in out-of-home care.

Research Case Studies

Ward, J. (2011). Concurrent Planning: report on a scoping exercise carried out for Faith in Families, Nottingham.
During 2008 -2009 Faith in Families investigated the possibility of introducing a concurrent planning scheme with 6 local authorities in the East Midlands. Planning for this became quite advanced, and a member of staff was appointed by Faith in Families to carry forward the project. Nottingham Trent University was asked to evaluate the implementation, and funding was secured through a Knowledge Transfer Partnership grant.
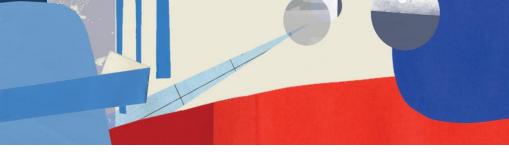
Summary taken from D'Andrade, A., Frame, L., Berrick. J.D. (2006). Concurrent planning in public child welfare agencies: Oxymoron or work in progress? *Children and Youth Services Review, 28 78-95.*
Concurrent planning is used increasingly in child welfare practice as one strategy to expedite permanency for children. The strategy was developed in small, private agency contexts utilizing comprehensive and intensive services; how and with what success concurrent planning concepts have been implemented by large public child welfare bureaucracies is not known. This study examines the implementation of concurrent planning in six county child welfare agencies in a large western state. Quantitative data were extracted from case files of a sample of 885 children entering out-of-home care before and after implementation of concurrent planning legislation. Interviews and focus groups with 180 individuals (including agency social workers, supervisors, and court personnel) from the same counties contextualize these findings.

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