

Knowledge and skills statement

Achieving Permanence



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West Midlands Social Work Teaching Partnership



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Introduction

Permanence means making a long-term plan for how a child will be cared for which lasts throughout their childhood. There are a range of options for permanence, inside and outside of the care system. All should deliver good outcomes, giving children a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging to ensure future positive life chances.

Permanence options for children include: returning home to their families; living with kinship carers, including special guardians; living with adoptive families; living with long-term foster carers; or living in residential care. They also include where an existing short-term placement is being made permanent.

A social worker responsible for permanence planning and support should be able to:





Decide on the best permanence option

- Eliminate drift for children by reaching the right decision within a timeframe which meets the child's best interests. Build a strong knowledge of all permanence options, so as to effectively explore all realistic options concurrently to secure a good outcome. Change direction if it becomes evident that the proposal being pursued is not in the child's best interests. Confidently defend decisions under scrutiny, effectively deploying evidence to demonstrate why a preferred option is favoured.
- Use research to draw evidence-based conclusions about the best permanence option for a child. Consider a range of realistic permanence options and the strengths and risk factors of each. Use research on the outcomes of different options and knowledge of child development to weigh up the pros and cons of the options available. Draw on research that is relevant to an individual child's specific circumstances and use it to inform how their short and long term needs, including their sense of identity and belonging, can best be met. Recognise that some children may require a placement with therapeutic treatment provision before a successful permanent home can be found. Maintain a focus on the rights, safety, needs, health, wellbeing and developmental recovery of the child and the circumstances that promote this.



Decide on the best permanence option

- Produce high quality case records about the child's permanence process which are well-argued and sensitively presented. Cite any research which has been influential. Draw on lessons learned locally on placement breakdowns, adoption breakdowns and long-term care outcomes. Assess the child's current and future needs by building effective relationships with children and families, any current or previous carers, professionals, including health and education professionals and social workers, and others directly involved in their care. Draw on the views of those who have knowledge and experience of the child, such as family members or foster carers. In the case of unborn children, conduct a good quality pre-birth assessment. Address complex questions where the needs and circumstances of a number of people, organisations and institutions are in conflict with each other. Assess the impact of trauma,

abuse, neglect, separation and loss on a child's development, and how this affects their capacity to build and maintain relationships. Take account of the child's developmental stage and the likely impact of different transitions, as well as the support the child may need along the way. Identify and harness the wider services the child may need to recover from previous experiences and to achieve stability. Take into account: the age of the child, recognising the different challenges that older children face and understanding the impact of adolescent neglect; the importance of existing relationships (including the positive and negative impact of these relationships) including friendships; and the potential benefits of maintaining peer relationships for a child's sense of identity and belonging.

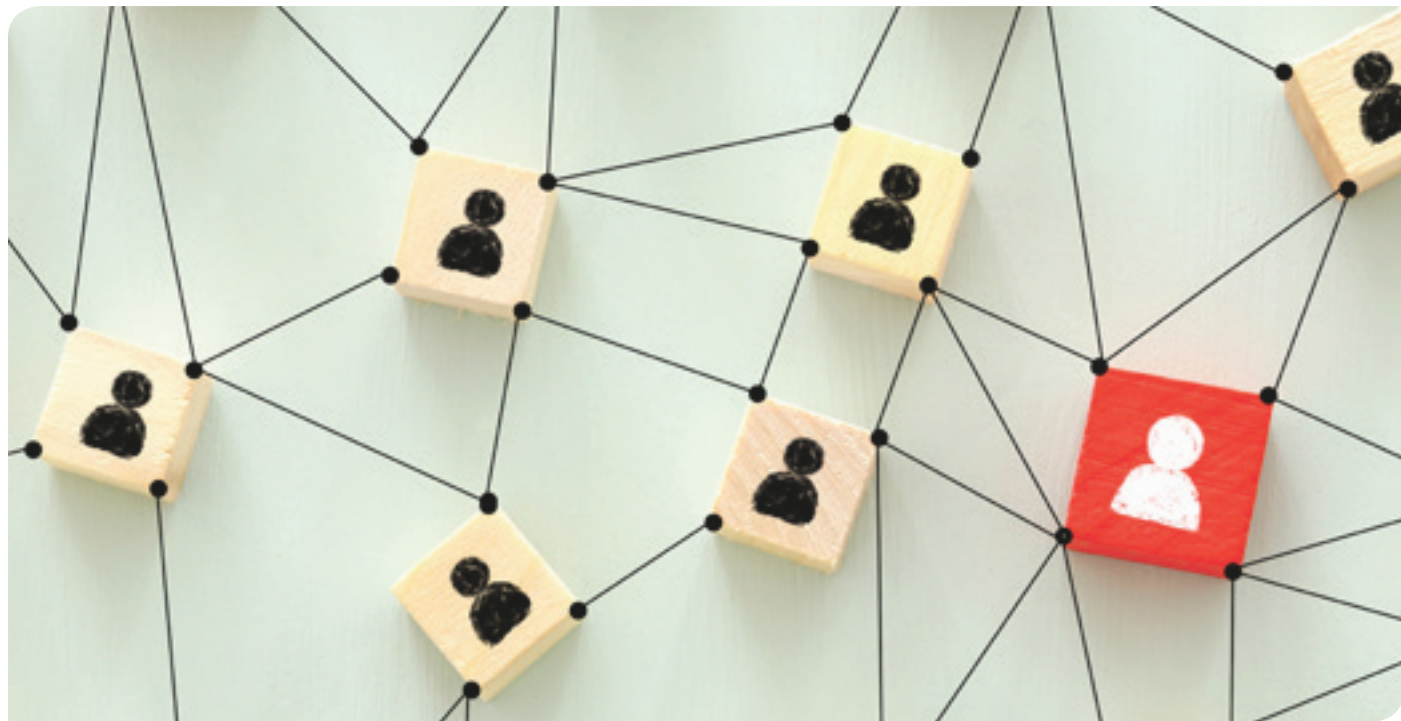


Decide on the best permanence option

- Acknowledge how adversity, inequality and limited life chances may impact on the plans for the child's future, and ways in which the impacts may be mitigated. Encourage the child to express their views, wishes and feelings with regard to permanence. Listen sensitively to the child to understand their preferences and involve and engage them when making decisions about their future. Assess the risks of a return home for the child. Ensure that parents have received the support they need and, where necessary, have demonstrated the changes required to care for the child throughout their childhood.

Assess: the parents' capacity for further or sustained change; and the impact of placing siblings together or separately and in various placement types. Pursue the child's best interests and identify ways to express their views even when contradictory to the views held by parents, family, other professionals, employers or other influential organisations such as the courts.

- Be prepared to provide feedback on processes and procedures.



Negotiate the legal process

- Operate within the statutory framework and regulatory process for achieving permanence for individual children, and comply with the legal powers, duties and guidance related to pursuing particular permanence options. Respond to a continuously changing legal environment and keep up to date with the latest regulations.
- Navigate the pre-proceedings phase, working within the Public Law Outline. Engage birth parents and other family members early, including through Family Group Conferences. Work with lawyers early in any potential proceedings and as care plans are developed, including deciding on the right permanence option for children.
- Communicate effectively and confidently in court and offer a clear rationale for recommendations. Present to the court a balanced picture of the child's needs and evidence of previous support and interventions that are relevant to the permanence decision-making process. Ensure that all court material is evidence based, well-prepared and clearly argued to support any legal orders that are required. Present cases in court with professional gravitas, with a focus on the child and a balanced, fair picture of the parents.



Negotiate the legal process

- Establish effective working relationships with agency lawyers, Independent Reviewing Officers, Cafcass guardians and relevant others, recognising the boundary between their respective and collective responsibilities. Consult with the child and their family and facilitate their representation in the court system. Keep the child and their family informed and communicate legal processes in a way they can understand. Work effectively with the local judiciary to meet legal requirements and prevent delay in achieving permanence arrangements.
- Establish effective working relationships with agency lawyers, Independent Reviewing Officers, Cafcass guardians and relevant others, recognising the boundary between their respective and collective responsibilities. Consult with the child and their family and facilitate their representation in the court system. Keep the child and their family informed and communicate legal processes in a way they can understand. Work effectively with the local judiciary to meet legal requirements and prevent delay in achieving permanence arrangements.



Help children find permanence without unnecessary delay

- Act purposefully to identify a permanent home for the child without unnecessary deliberations which cause delay, understanding the potential damage to a child as a result of delay. Recognise the effects of unconscious bias and risk aversion on decision making and utilise supervision to reflect on dilemmas about matching. Balance the ambition of finding the best home for the child with the need to achieve permanence. Give due consideration to the child's preferences and ensure that where these cannot be acted upon, there is a clear rationale for that. Keep the child and their families informed and communicate clearly, openly and sensitively any decisions regarding their future.
- Produce accessible, high quality, well-argued, evidenced and sensitively presented assessments of a carer's/home's strengths, difficulties, experiences and current and likely future needs, and of their wishes and hopes. Build and maintain effective relationships with parents, prospective carers or residential homes to assess their suitability. Recognise: the extent to which carers will be able to act in the best interests of the child and promote their health and wellbeing; and the different qualities, capacity and support carers might need to look after a child who presents behaviours associated with negative early life and childhood experiences.



Help children find permanence without unnecessary delay

- Understand the legal entitlements to support for different types of carers. Provide high quality communications. Listen to the child to understand their long term aspirations, and assess a potential carer's abilities to support the child in achieving these goals. Produce child and carer profiles that present an accurate summary of current and likely future needs, as well as a balanced picture of the child including their likes and dislikes, how they

behave and their wishes and feelings. Engage in clear, open and timely communication with carers, which is honest about children's needs and the impact that any negative early experiences have had on their health and mental health, whilst being positive and solution-focussed about how these might be met. Provide a professional and high quality service where potential carers are treated with respect.



Support children and families in transition

- Undertake sufficient direct work to help children, and current and future carers, prepare for a successful transition. Communicate clearly, openly and sensitively with children, their families and carers about the planning process for moving into a permanent home or back to their birth home. Ensure that the reasons for any move are communicated in a way that is appropriate to the child's age and understanding, and that any questions or concerns the child has are listened to. Support children and carers to set realistic expectations and prepare children thoroughly for the different stages of that journey.
- Support carers to: promote a child's sense of identity, self-worth and belonging; understand how best to share a child's history and the events that led to previous and current care arrangements - for example, through life story work (in digital or other formats appropriate for the child); and understand how a child's behaviour is dependent on their experience of both past and present parenting. Co-create with carers helpful strategies to meet a child's needs, and in particular where carers may find behaviour challenging.



Support children and families in transition

- Demonstrate professional expertise in managing potentially distressing transitions, recognising the complexity of family dynamics and the potential impact of loss and change. Provide support and advocacy to children, parents and/or carers, demonstrating sensitivity and empathy. Help current carers and birth families to cope with the transition, remembering that this may be a period of great loss and disappointment.
- Develop high quality plans to support the transition process. Work collaboratively with all parties (including multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary colleagues) to plan and deliver a smooth transition that causes as little distress and disruption to the child as possible. Recognise that for some children a stable transition should take place over a period of time to ensure that the best outcome is achieved.
- Where a child is not returning home, assess, plan and support the appropriate level of contact with their birth family based on the individual child's specific needs. Support children, their siblings, carers and the child's birth family to understand, engage with and contribute to plans for successful contact with each other. Recognise when contact is likely to be problematic, and provide appropriate support and review.



Support the placement, including managing disruption and breakdown

- Identify the most effective types of support using the best evidence, and apply this to the provision of flexible, on-going arrangements. Build a professional network of expertise to help families get the short and long-term support they need. Know what therapy options are available and their application, and support families to identify accessible resources that will respond in time. Build helpful relationships with families that empower the parent, carer or child to ask for support when they need it. Work closely with family networks and professional networks, including Independent Reviewing Officers, to review arrangements and change these through consultation as the needs of the family change, addressing any escalating risks. Identify indicators and early warning signs that a permanent home is

under strain. Work collaboratively, with respect and without blame, with all parties to plan and deliver services and interventions that will support the child's network and may prevent family breakdown, including short out of home placements. Understand the different dynamics that each permanence option brings and how this affects a social worker's ability to engage and intervene.



Support the placement, including managing disruption and breakdown

- Be clear and decisive in situations where children are unable to remain at home, balancing the short and long term impact of moving the child with the likelihood of future and irreparable breakdown of relationships if action is not taken. Where breakdown occurs, work collaboratively with all parties to understand the reasons for breakdown and the options for supporting alternative short or medium term arrangements that enable the child to maintain relationships with carers or parents in periods of crisis. Recognise that a move to a placement that better meets the child's needs is positive. Make clear the need for the child to be safe and to have stability in their home lives, relationships and education.

Be alert to: attempts by children to 'test' new arrangements and support carers and parents to access support from family, friends and community networks, where appropriate; and the potential vulnerabilities of children at the point of disruption, and apply strategies to fully support them through this transition. Where breakdown occurs, assess whether and how the relationship can be sustained.

- Working with your wider organisation, identify and apply any lessons learned.

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