

Practice and Policy Strategies for Permanency Planning in Child Welfare

Peter J. Pecora, M.S.W., Ph.D.

Managing Director of Research Services, Casey Family Programs, and Professor, School of Social Work, University of Washington. Presentation sponsored by the Association of Child Welfare Agencies and the Research Centre for Children and Families, The University of Sydney. March 8, 2022

E-mail: Ppecora@UW.edu



Outline

I. Fundamental Values and Principles

II. Practice Strategies

III. Barriers to Permanency and Areas for Future Research

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Steve Kinmond, Suzanne Pope, Irene Wardle, and Amy Conley Wright for providing key background about child welfare policy and practice in Australia.

As with the Center, I acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians, whose lands, winds and waters we now all share, and pay respect to their unique values, and their continuing and enduring cultures which deepen and enrich the life of our nation and communities.

I respectfully acknowledge the traditional owners of Country upon whose land the various campuses of the University of Sydney now sit: Gadigal people of the Eora Nation; Deerubbin, Tharawal, Ngunnawal, Wiradjuri, Gamilaroi, Bundjulong, Wiljali and Gureng Gureng peoples.

I. Fundamental Values and Principles



Defining Permanency

“Permanency in out-of-home care should promote a sense of belonging from a secure home, emotionally connected relationships, and right to culture.”

[<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/2021/08/04/multiple-meanings-permanency>]

Major dimensions – relational, physical, and legal:

- A safe, nurturing and stable home environment and set of relationships
- Permanent home that can be returned to as an adult
- Family committed to supporting child for a lifetime
- Legal and definitive

What Do We Value?

(from the 2021 Framework for Protecting Australia's Children)

1. Our goal: to ensure the safety, permanency and well-being of children and their families.
2. Access to quality universal and targeted services designed to improve outcomes for children, young people, and families
3. Trauma-informed, culturally safe, and inclusive policies and actions
4. Listening and responding to the voices and views of children and young people, and the view of those who care for them
5. Embedding the five elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principles: prevention, partnership, placement, participation and connection

What Do We Know From Theory?

These theories underscore the value of keeping families together, and if a child is placed, achieving permanency quickly:

- Attachment theory: Critical periods for attachment
- Neuroscience: Critical developmental periods and neuroplasticity
- Child development theory: minimizing interruptions in moving through developmental stages
- Trauma theory: pervasive and long-lasting effects

What Do We Know From Research?

- ▶ To support child well-being, it is important to intervene as early as possible.
- ▶ The act of removing children from their families and social networks creates emotional distress and trauma that should be avoided whenever possible.
- ▶ Most children are best served by remaining at home while their parents receive the community services and supports they need – **IF** their safety can be maintained.

What Do We Know from Research? (Cont.)

- ▶ “Permanent placement” in the form of legal guardianship with relatives, kin or tribal members is generally less traumatic and more stable.
- ▶ Racial and ethnic disparities in terms of who achieves permanency and how quickly are substantial and represent an urgent issue.
- ▶ A new Child Trends brief argues that reframing Black families’ cultural assets—i.e., the core protective elements that many U.S. Black families share, such as cultural values, traditions, and practices—is crucial to developing policies and practices that enhance their well-being.

What Do We Know from Research? (Cont.)

- ▶ When children cannot be reunited with parents, remaining in long-term foster often results in poor child and adult outcomes.
- ▶ Fortunately, there are permanency alternatives to consider if family restoration is not possible.
- ▶ Depending on laws, culture and other factors: legal guardianship and various forms of adoption can be good options.

What Do We Know from Research? (Cont.)

In choosing these options, careful multi-dimensional assessment is needed – along with cultural humility – where we learn about the best service options from the child, parents, and their cultural community. For example:

- ▶ Who in the child's social network should be considered first as a permanent guardian?

What Do We Know from Research? (Cont.)

If adoption is the best option, what kind of adoption?

- ▶ *Open adoption* – where updates or child–birth parent contact of some kind is negotiated as part of the adoption plan.
- ▶ *Customary Adoption* – for Torres Strait Islanders and First Nation’s children in other countries this does not require termination of parental rights. And it lessens shame and family stress while providing children with permanence.

II. Practice Strategies



Assessment-Focused Practice Strategies

- ▶ *Conducting a multi-dimensional and trauma-informed assessment of the child and the family* regarding threats to the child's safety, family strengths, family resources and community resources
 - Appreciative Inquiry
 - Motivational Interviewing
 - Signs of Safety
 - Social network or social support maps
 - Safety mapping and Three Houses

Three Houses Activity Sheet



House of
Worries



House of
Good Things



House of
Dreams



Weld, N. (2008). The three houses tool: Building safety and positive change. In M. Calder (Ed.) *Contemporary risk assessment in safeguarding children*. Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing.

Selected Practice Strategies (Cont.)

- ▶ Family Finding – and other strategies for finding and engaging extended family members
- ▶ Icebreaker meetings, spending time with family members, including enhancing parent–child visits and supporting birth and foster parents – as exemplified by the Fostering Lifelong Connections practice strategies
- ▶ Functional Family Therapy (FFT)
- ▶ KEEP and KEEP SAFE as foster family support strategies to prevent placement disruption through healthy parenting

Selected Practice Strategies (Cont.)

- ▶ Legal representation for parents -- with parent partners and use of “veteran parents” for support and guidance
- ▶ Permanency Values Training (Casey Family Programs)
- ▶ Solution-Based Casework
- ▶ Substance abuse treatment that is family-based and residential – which keeps families together.
- ▶ Trauma-informed practice (e.g., NEAR framework: Neuroscience, Epigenetics, ACES, and Resilience and what Bruce Perry calls “trauma-mindful practice”)

Organizational Climate & Culture Matter

(Glisson et al. studies)

Social context of organization matters in terms of achieving permanency:

- ▶ *What are the shared:*
 - Expectations
 - Attitudes
 - Perceptions

- ▶ *What are the effects on:*
 - Practice
 - Outcomes for youth
 - Perceived support and self-efficacy

Building a Culture of Permanency

- ▶ Expanding the definition of permanency
- ▶ Are the “permanency oars” rowing in same direction?
 - Framework for older youth
 - Permanency values
 - Permanency interventions
 - Funding streams reflect values
 - Organizational climate and culture
 - Is the staff hiring and training in synch?
 - Involving other systems (e.g., BH, ED, PH)

Cultural Uniqueness and Other Considerations

The **core protective elements** that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may share, such as cultural values, traditions, and practices—are crucial to developing policies and interventions that enhance their well-being.

- ▶ What do line staff and supervisors need to know more about?
- ▶ What helping strategies need to be added or strengthened?

Cultural Uniqueness and Other Considerations (Cont.)

What policy and budget changes will reduce racial/ethnic disparities in child placement and permanency in Australia?

- Investment in **infrastructure**: buildings, equipment, technology, accounting services, human resources
- Investment in **staff and communities**: worker salaries and benefits, direct practice technology, and access to concrete resources for families

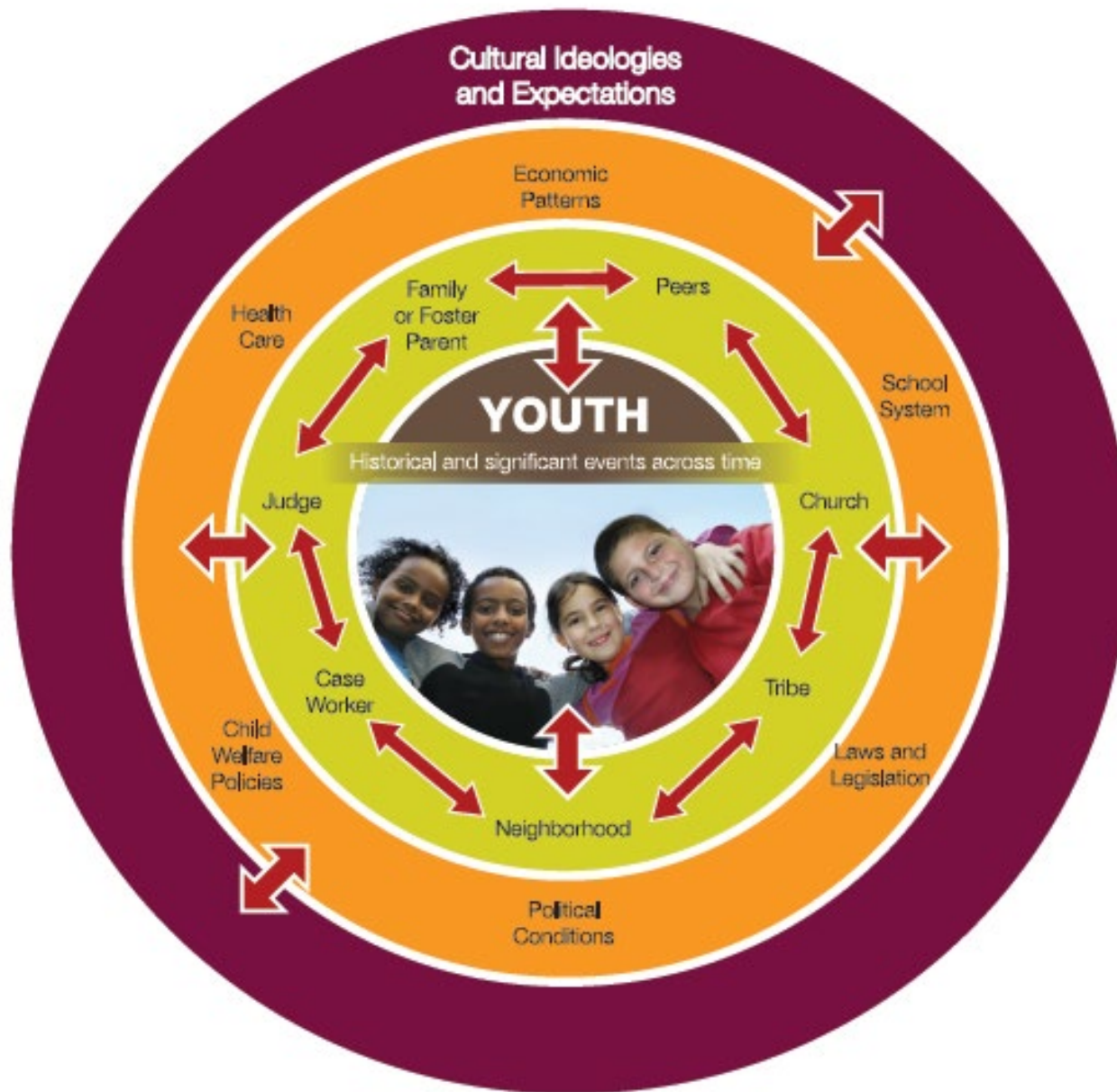


FIGURE 1: This youth-centered ecological model provides examples of systems with the most to least direct impact on a youth. This model can be used by child welfare systems, individual caseworkers, community agencies and youth to identify systems and relationships requiring the most attention. Moreover, it offers a lens through which youth and their immediate support systems can begin to develop individualized plans for permanency.

Permanency Roundtable Process

Welcome and overview

Oral case presentation

Clarify and explore

Brainstorm solutions using the five key questions:

- What will it take to achieve permanency?
- What can we try that has been tried before?
- What can we try that has NEVER been tried?
- How many things can we do concurrently?
- How can we engage the youth in planning for permanence?

Create a Permanency Action Plan

Debrief

Permanency Roundtable Team

Master Practitioner

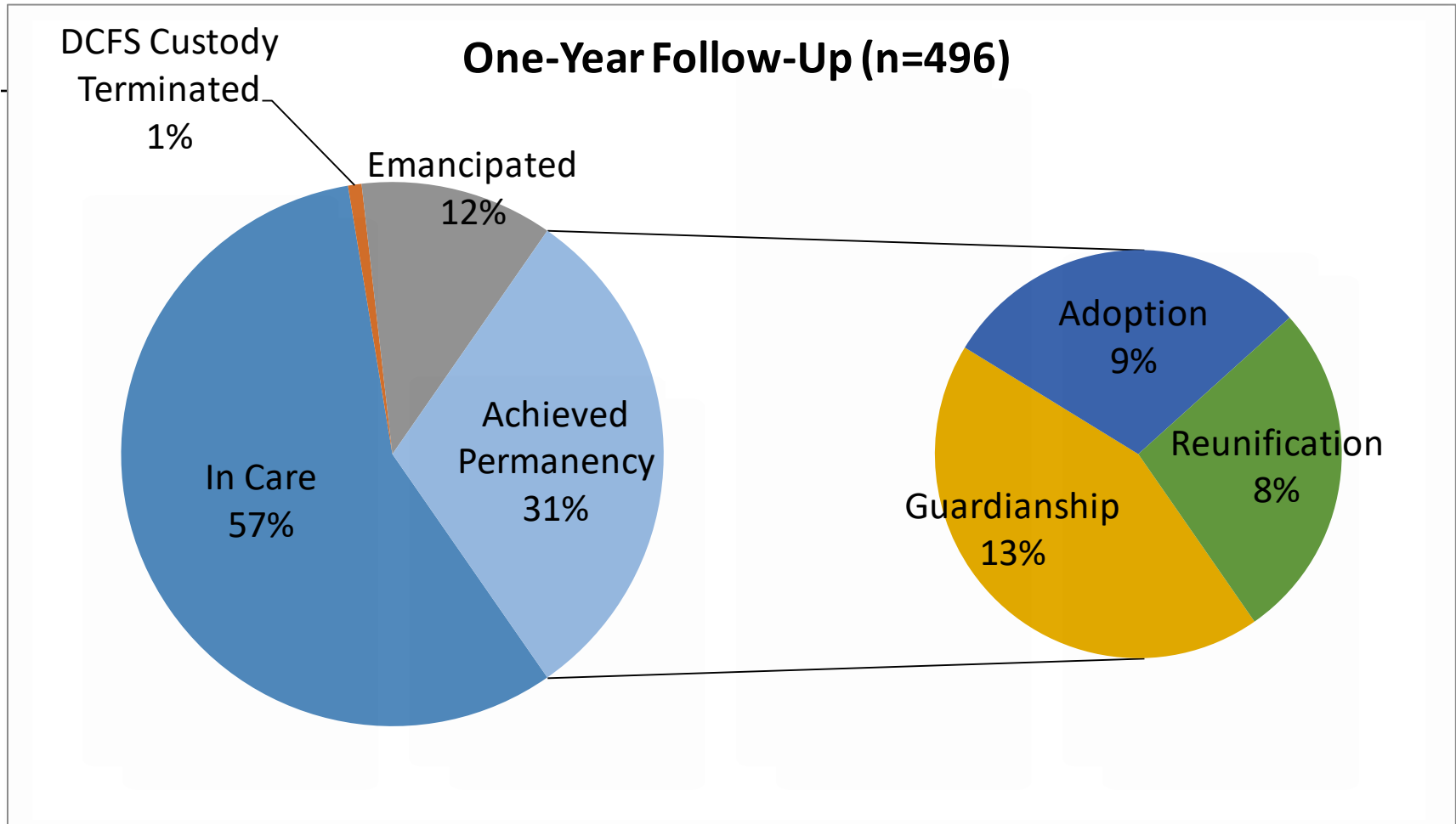
Permanency Expert

Case Manager for the case

Supervisor (of the case manager)

Facilitators

Permanency Roundtable Outcomes



See: <https://www.casey.org/georgia-permanency-roundtables/> and <https://www.casey.org/permanency-roundtables/>

III. Barriers to Permanency and Areas for Future Research



What are Barriers to Permanency in Australia?

- ▶ Policies – What needs to be changed?
- ▶ Attitudes – Whose? In what way?
- ▶ Case planning process – Where?
- ▶ Not enough families recruited to foster and adopt teens?
- ▶ Various permanency options are readily available?
- ▶ Legal proceedings for family restoration, legal guardianship or adoption sometimes take too long?
- ▶ Other barriers?

Areas for Future Research

1. What strategies and combinations of strategies are most effective for achieving timely permanency? For which groups and communities?
2. What factors prevent re-entry into foster care after family restoration?
3. What happens to youth after they achieve legal permanency? After they reach age 18 and are in guardianship or adoptive homes?
4. How do youth outcomes differ based on type of exit?
5. Does extension of foster care beyond age 18 help?

Last chance to contribute to research on restoration

We are inviting professionals who have experience supporting families during child protection investigations to complete an anonymous, online survey before **Friday 18th March**

The survey is part of the *Working Toward Restoration* study which aims to understand what workers view as most important in court decisions about whether a child can be safely restored to the care of their parent or not.

The survey should take no more than 20 minutes and you can use a laptop or desktop computer (PC or Mac).

The survey uses Q-Method software. You will be asked to rank 28 statements about evidence the court weighs up in deciding if there a realistic possibility of restoration. This is called a 'forced choice' survey so you need to arrange responses according to a pre-set configuration. You may find it hard to choose between some statements so just arrange them as closely as possible to your views. Press 'submit' at the end of the survey to record your response.

To read more about the study and complete the survey

click the

link <https://app.qmethodsoftware.com/study/9311>

The link will also be shared in the 'chat'

The research team thanks you (in advance) for your help

References

- Adoptive and Foster Family Coalition. (2016). Visit coaching: Meeting children's needs. Retrieved from <http://affcnny.org/fostercare/shared-parenting/visitation-resources/visit-coaching-supporting-families/> and <https://partnersforourchildren.org/projects/strive>
- Australian permanency support program web-page: <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/families/permanency-support-program>
- Biehle, K., & Goodman, D. (2012). *Icebreaker meetings: A tool for building relationships between birth and foster parents*. Maryland: Annie E. Casey Foundation. Retrieved from <https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-IcebreakerMeetingsToolkit-2012.pdf>
- Luu, B., Collins, S. & Wright, A.C. (2022). A systematic review of common elements of practice that support reunification. *Children and Youth Services Review, 133*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2021.106342>.

References (Cont.)

- Roberts, Y.H., Shimshock, S., O'Brien, K., Claps, M., Cabrera, J. & Rozanski, T. (2018). *Data to Practice: The Impact of Placement with Family on Safety, Permanency, and Well-being*. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs. <https://www.casey.org/impact-of-placement-with-family/>
- Rostad, W., Zimmermann, A., O'Brien, K., Claps, M. & Martinez, M. (2020). *From data to practice: Moving youth to family — level of need and the impact on legal and relational permanency*. Seattle: Casey Family Programs. www.Casey.org
- Wright, A.C. & Collings, S. (2019). Permanency with lifelong connections: Casework practices to support positive relationships between carer and birth families. *Developing Practice: The Child, Youth and Family Work Journal*, 53, 92–109, p. 94.
- Wright, A.C., Luu, B. & Cashmore, J. (2021). Adoption in Australia: Past, present and considerations for the future. *Australian Law Journal*, 95, 67–80.