

Permanence in long-term foster care: family relationships and professional systems

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Different elements to be thought about – nationally and internationally

- Permanence - the meaning of family, the dialogue between adoption and foster care
- Research on outcomes of long-term foster care
- Systems for planning, supporting and monitoring long-term foster placements –experience of children and foster / birth families
- Foster carer /parent roles and relationships- ‘professionalisation’ of foster care

Selected relevant research

At CRCF, University of East Anglia

- Part of the Family / Growing up in foster care
- Birth parents of children in foster care
- Care planning for permanence in foster care
- Care planning and the role of the independent reviewing officer

At SPRU, University of York

- Pursuit of permanence – Ian Sinclair et al
- Belonging and permanence – Nina Biehal et al
- Leaving care – Mike Stein et al

Long-term foster care (LTFC) and permanence – international policy differences and debates

- **USA and Canada** – lack of trust in LTFC and a strong preference / drive to achieve adoption
- **UK** – value adoption BUT also developing new policy / practices to establish LTFC more effectively
- **Scandinavia** – Birth family ‘rights’ : LTFC is accepted but adoption now being re-considered in Norway /Finland
- **France, Italy, Spain** – Focus on birth family – kinship care / residential care – limited LTFC in Spain
- **Australia /New Zealand** – Permanent foster care - but now some reconsideration of adoption in spite of ‘stolen generation’ of indigenous children

UK Permanence: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Guidance / Regulations 2010

- **Permanence** is the framework of **emotional** permanence (attachment), **physical** permanence (stability) and **legal** permanence (the carer has parental responsibility for the child) which gives a child a sense of **security, continuity, commitment and identity**.
- The objective of planning for permanence is therefore to ensure that children have a **secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond**.
- Permanence provides an underpinning framework for all social work with children and families from family support through to adoption.

Is it necessary to be a ‘legal parent’ ?

- Set of assumptions about link between parenthood and legal status – as a substitute for biological parenthood.
- Emphasis on legal parenthood appears to exclude long-term foster carers as parents – except as a role delegated to them by the state
- Complex relationship between the ‘corporate parent’ (the state, the local authority politicians and managers, the social worker) and the 24 hour ‘parenting’ parent /carer

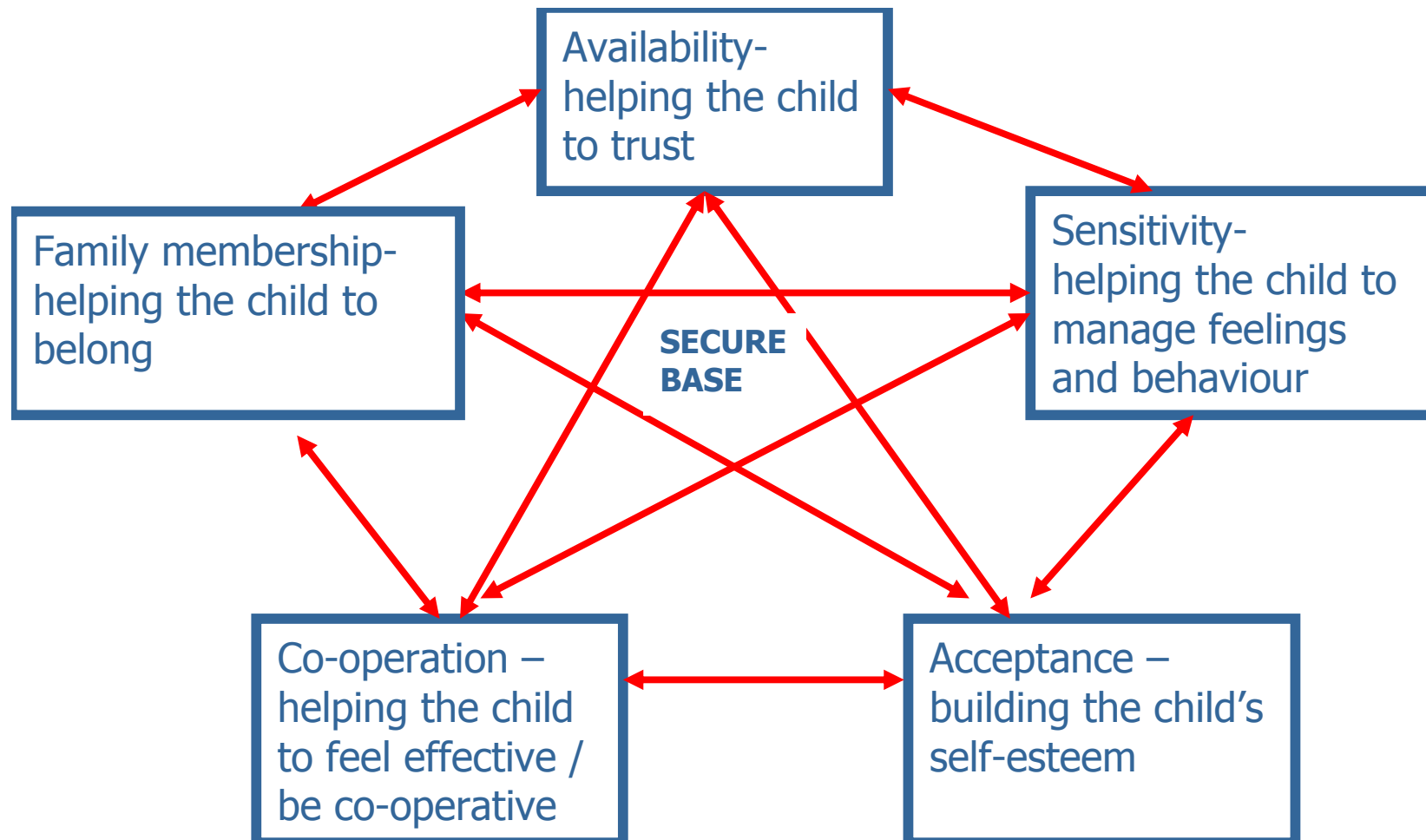
Meaning of 'permanence' - Foster carer

- 'In my mind permanence is a word that means a lot. It means that Marie is never going to leave, not when she's 18,19, 20 or whatever. If she goes to university, not when she's 25. She's always going to be part of our family. I am sure when she's 36 and has got her own children, she will be bringing them to us, I will probably be looking after them. We are always going to be her Mama and Papa.'

Continuity, security, love and identity – through childhood and beyond

- Importance not just of continuity, but continuity in the context of loving care /quality of attachment
- Question of ‘identity’ - the words ‘family membership’ or even a ‘sense of belonging’ are missing.
- ‘Childhood and beyond’ – when we ask a child /carer to commit to a permanent placement, what does this mean?

Secure Base: attachment, resilience **and** family membership (uea.ac.uk/providingasecurebase)



Outcomes of long-term foster care

- Schofield et al (2009)– longitudinal study of planned LTFC
N= 52
 - 30 (57%) were stable in their original placement or had moved to independence in a planned way.
 - 10 (19%) were stable and thriving in more successful placements they had moved to or had moved to independence in a planned way.
 - THUS in total 40 (76%) were stable and functioning reasonably well (e.g. in peer networks, in mainstream school, in employment)

- Biehal et al (2010): comparison of adoption by strangers, adoption by foster carers, and LTFC
 - In **stable** long-term foster care, behavioural and education outcomes were comparable to adoption

Care planning for permanence in foster care (2008-2011)

- Research questions:
 - To investigate systems and social work practice in assessing, planning and matching for long-term foster care
 - To investigate the views and experiences of social workers, foster carers and children
- Methods
 - File search of 230 children with recent LTFC plans in 6 areas
 - 40 interviews with foster carers
 - 20 interviews with children/young people
 - 6 practitioner /manager focus groups

Selected quantitative findings (N=230)

- Age at first becoming looked after:
Under 5, 35%; 5-10, 53%; 11+, 13%
- Age at LTFC plan :
Under 5, 9%; 5-10, 52%; 11+, 39%
- Previous plan for adoption / had an adoption breakdown:
25% (58) / 4% (10)
- Number of care placements
mean 3 (range 1 – 23)

Stability

- 22% (51) of children experienced the ending of a long-term foster placement
- Endings could be initiated by carers, children- or by social workers

NB The quality of the foster carers and of the match between the child's needs and the parenting capacity of the carers seemed to be central.

Children's and foster carers' experiences of systems to plan and support LTFC

- LAC reviews of the care plan, six monthly – chaired by Independent Reviewing Officers
 - Very mixed views from children and carers - **from** positive sense of being cared about and participation **to** intrusive in 'normal' family life
- Corporate parenting / delegated authority
 - for children and carers- wanting carers to make 'parenting decisions like a parent'. [This is now Government policy]
- 'Having' a social worker
 - Can be difficult /intrusive for the child and carer- but social workers can be valued as an advocate and 'secure base'.

Schofield G, Beek, M, and Ward, E. (2012) Part of the Family: Care Planning for Permanence in Foster Care *Children and Youth Services Review* 34, pp. 244-253

Professional foster carer and committed parent: work-family balance

- Wider research on family /work and role / boundaries - usually about parents who work outside of the home.
- Work and family are considered as two different spheres of activity - different role identities and cultural meanings.
- For **foster carers**, their family is their work and their work is their family –roles are not so clearly separated and boundaries are not so clearly defined.
- How do carers manage different and potentially contradictory role identities - especially in LTFC?

Research findings: role identity in LTFC – professional carers and /or parents?

- Permanent foster placements can be successful where carers have different primary role identities
 - Primary identity as foster carers, but also accept the role of parent
 - Primary identity as parents, but also accept the role of carer

- Problems can occur where
 - Foster carers identify exclusively as carers but do not take on a parenting role / commitment
 - Foster carers identify exclusively as parents but do not accept carer role/responsibilities

Professional foster carer and committed parent – role integration

- Where professional carer and committed parent roles could be accepted and integrated, each role enriches the other
- Sensitive, secure base caregivers were more likely to be able to integrate roles – for themselves and in the interests of the child

Conclusion

- Permanence in foster care can offer security, relationships and family belonging through to adulthood
- Professionalisation of foster carer need not be a barrier to being a parent providing a family life for children
- Being a parent need not be a barrier to professional expectations e.g. of training, working with social workers
- Goal - the development of a form of foster care that more nearly approaches a 'family for life', which is not seen as 'second best' and in which carers can act as parents.

(Sinclair 2005:123)