A constructivist study of the decision-making process in permanency planning

Martha Paralee Allen

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A CONSTRUCTIVIST STUDY OF THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN PERMANENCY PLANNING

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Martha Paralee Allen
Donna Jean Holden
Sunni Lee Reed

June 1993
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This is a local government agency-based constructivist study that explores the divergent and subjective views of various participants involved in the decision-making process of permanency planning for court-dependent children. Data was gathered through face-to-face interviews and a literature search.

The goal of the project was to study the process of decision-making in permanency planning in an effort to improve the success rate of these plans and better address the agency's objective to serve the best interest of the child.

Content analysis was used to categorize data, and findings were consistent with current literature. Results suggest that permanency planning begin earlier, that a complete bio-psycho-social-cultural assessment be completed for every child, and that lines of communication and training be improved for both staff and caretakers. These recommendations were presented to the agency. An agenda was formed for future research and discussion.
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ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

This was a group project and a team effort where authors collaborated throughout the project. However, for each phase of the project, certain authors took primary responsibility. These responsibilities were assigned in the manner listed below.

1. **Data Collection:** Martha Allen, Donna Holden and Sunni Reed equally shared responsibility.

2. **Data Entry and Analysis:** Martha Allen, Donna Holden and Sunni Reed equally shared responsibility.

3. **Writing Report and Presentation of Findings:**
   a. **Introduction and Literature**
      Assigned Leader: Sunni Reed
      Working with: Martha Allen and Donna Holden
   b. **Methods**
      Assigned Leader: Donna Holden
      Working with: Martha Allen and Sunni Reed
   c. **Results**
      Assigned Leader: Martha Allen
      Working with: Donna Holden and Sunni Reed
   c. **Discussion**
      Martha Allen, Donna Holden and Sunni Reed equally shared responsibility.
INTRODUCTION

Focus of Inquiry

Children grow best in permanent homes, where they feel wanted, cherished and secure. Sadly, in San Bernardino County more than 3000 children at any given time, cannot live with their birth parents because of their parent’s inability to be adequate caretakers (San Bernardino County, 1991). These parents have problems with drug abuse, physical or sexual abuse, incarceration, mental illness, or are simply unable to cope with the demands of daily living. When these children come into the foster care system, they become dependents of Juvenile Court, based on California State Welfare and Institutions Code. The law clearly outlines the court’s ruling that children are entitled to permanence and stability. Parents may have up to eighteen months in which to reunify with their children. After that time, the court is mandated to make permanent plans for these children. These plans include adoption, legal guardianship by the caretaker, or long-term foster care as alternatives to returning to their parents’ homes.

These three options for permanency offer different levels of commitment to the child. Adoption, which is universally considered to be the most desirable permanent plan, legally makes the child a part of a family, just as
if they were born into that family. They assume the family name and rights to inheritance. The child is given the message that the family has both a legal and moral commitment to love and nurture them, no matter what problems the child may encounter.

Guardianship is the next most desirable plan. In this permanent plan, caretakers assume some responsibility for the child in terms of signing for medical care, and involvement in school planning, but do not sever the birth parent’s rights, nor do guardians assume financial responsibility for the child. The child is given the message that they have two sets of parents, the guardians and the birth parents. They understand that the parenting situation is temporary and subject to change.

The third, and least desirable permanency plan is long-term foster care. This option is considered only when return to the birth parent is impossible and there are no adults willing to become the child’s adoptive parent or guardian. Long term foster care gives the child a safe place to live, but legally allots the child "second-class citizenship", within the foster family. They do not carry the family name, they can stay with the family only as long as the family is willing to keep them, and the family has no legal or moral commitment to them beyond providing a safe place to live.
Statement of Purpose

San Bernardino County Department of Public Social Services has placement practices based on the belief that permanent plans for children should be in the "best interest of the child". It appeared to us, however, that this practice was not always the basis on which placements were made.

Our purpose was to determine the factors that influence the decision making process of permanency planning for a child and what could be done to improve that process. Do adoption workers use a different set of criteria to plan for permanency than protective service social workers? Do foster parents use the same standards as adoptive parents in determining their level of commitment? What constitutes the decision tree used by attorneys and judges?

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Methods

Our inquiry was subjective. It seemed to lend itself naturally to the constructivist paradigm because it intended to explore subjective understandings of a decision-making process. We wanted to form a shared construction of this process. In addition, the
The constructivist paradigm fit more closely with our research problem because we had no true hypothesis, or even a clear research question.

The constructivist paradigm assumes that any human search for knowledge is inherently value-laden and that research should openly acknowledge this assumption. The purpose of our research then, was to study the process of decision-making in permanency planning — in its natural setting.

**The Hermeneutic Dialectic Circle**

The hermeneutic dialectic circle serves as a visual construct of our respondent groups, that is, the participants (and, other, non-human sources of data) involved in the decision-making process in permanency planning. According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), the circle "...is hermeneutic because it is interpretive in character, and dialectic because it represents a comparison and contrast of divergent views with a view to achieving a higher-level synthesis of them all..." (page 149).

Figure 1 represents our proposed hermeneutic dialectic circle.
There were eight identified stakeholder/participant groups included in our initial hermeneutic dialectic circle. We proposed to interview an equal number of representatives from each segment of the circle. These representatives were drawn from a pool of adoptive, guardianship and foster families, social workers, attorneys, and judges in San Bernardino County.

As indicated in the "circle", relevant research literature and case file reviews from Adoption and Child Protective Services were to be treated as additional constructions about bonding and attachment in the context of permanency planning. Previous research studies were
to be reviewed and integrated into the other respondent
data. In the review of case files, we intended to look
for disruption in adoptive placements related to issues
of attachment and bonding and for problems or disruptions
in long-term foster home care and legal guardianship cases.

After content analysis was under way, it become
apparent that case reviews were not going to give us the
information we needed. In addition, confidentiality
constraints prevented the separation of legal professional
into smaller, more identifiable groups, such as "child’s
attorneys", "parent’s attorneys" and "juvenile court
judges". We made a joint decision to modify the circle
by eliminating the case review segment and incorporating
all legal professionals into one participant group.
Figure 2 depicts these changes.

Figure 2
The Modified Hermeneutic Dialectic Circle
- Identified Participant Groups -

Foster Parents | Child Protective Service Social Workers
Fos-dopt Parents | Adoption Social Workers
Relative/Guardian Families | Pertinent Research Literature
Juvenile Court Legal Professionals | Research Evaluators
Our respondent's collective professional and personal experience with permanency planning was extensive and diverse. A listing of the experiences drawn from actual respondent interviews is outlined in Appendix B.

**Investigators**

The test instrument was actually the body of knowledge and experience of the individuals involved in the decision-making process. Because our data was collected using primarily human test instruments, we recognized the importance of utilizing theoretical sensitivity in the collection of the data. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), "Theoretical sensitivity refers to a personal quality of the researcher. It indicates an awareness of the subtleties of meaning of data" (page 41).

While experience and knowledge of the permanency planning process by the evaluators was desirable and aided the evaluator's understanding of the qualitative data, there was also the inherent biases of the evaluator's own construction which might interfere with true recording of data.

We believe that the composition of our evaluation team minimized this problem. Our team consisted of two evaluators who had experience and knowledge from the different perspectives of Child Protective Services.
and Adoption Services. The remaining evaluator had no experience with the permanency planning process and therefore, provided a counter measure of objectivity.

To help ensure consistency in the recording of data, the evaluation team members initially familiarized themselves with the terms and issues in the permanency planning process. In addition, the evaluation team members met regularly during the entire data collection phase. Reviewing and refining of notes was done immediately after each interview. Notes were discussed and integrated continuously as data was collected. As a further measure to maximize standardization in the recording of data, all three evaluators attempted to interview participants in as many stakeholder groups as possible.

**Trustworthiness**

It was difficult to establish a system of quality control because each participant’s construction was different from that of every other participant. The initial goal then, of quality control in this study was to ensure that each participant’s construction was noted carefully and reported accurately.

Participation in our research study was entirely voluntary. Prior to the initial interview, the design and purpose of the study was explained. It was made clear to each participant that their constructions would be
shared anonymously with other participants. Informed consent was obtained before each interview began (see Appendix A).

Strict confidentiality constraints which already exist as part of San Bernardino County Standards of Employee Conduct was applied to all review of case records used in our study. In data collection, a numeric coding system was utilized to protect the identity of individual participants and case records.

Our research advisor filled the role of auditor by looking at our data and asking questions to clarify issues that emerged. We attempted to avoid influencing the constructions of each segment of our research by having each member of our research team interview a cross-section of our sample.

We made every attempt to verify the accuracy of our interpretation of each participant's construction, by actively feeding back that interpretation as we conducted interviews. When a participant felt that they had not been accurately quoted or understood, we made the corrections both verbally, and in writing. Likewise, in order to ensure an accurate account of the process we followed as the study progressed, we maintained careful records of our interviews. In addition, we faithfully recorded all negotiations that occurred in the process of the study.
SUBSTANTIVE CONSIDERATIONS

The Evaluator’s Construction in Context

Who makes decisions about a child’s permanence within a family and how do they arrive at that decision? In San Bernardino County, social workers from Child Protective Services and Adoption Services, and the child’s and parent’s attorneys make recommendations to the Court regarding the child’s permanency future. The court then makes the final decision and orders the plan to be implemented. Meanwhile, current foster parents and prospective adoptive or foster-adoptive parents make decisions about what level of permanency they are willing to offer a particular child.

When planning this study, we thought that, ideally, these decision-makers would base their decisions on the current body of knowledge regarding attachment and bonding and the issues of separation and loss for children. They would carefully weigh the individual child’s circumstances and needs. Additionally, they would look at the caretakers’ or prospective caretakers motivation and level of commitment to the child. They would carefully assess the psychological ramifications of that level of commitment to the child’s overall sense of well being and make their decision and recommendation based on that assessment. However, as
we collected data, we realized that permanency planning was not based on these ideals.

We began with our own construction that these key players make decisions based on their own life experiences rather than on the documented needs of the individual child. We thought that if we queried the key players on their decision-making process in making life plans for these children, we would find that the decision is often tainted by the decision-maker’s frame of reference in regard to bonding and separation issues.

Transactions

Intention of Transactions

As constructivist evaluators, we set out with the understanding that continuous refinement of our design would be necessary as each piece of data was recorded and each component of the joint construction was devised. We anticipated a progressively more structured design as we gathered data and the emergence of a progressively greater consensus among our stakeholder/participants.

We began with the expectation that our use of the constructivist approach would help the key players in permanency planning decision-making explore their subjective understandings of the process. We thought that we would gather information which would lead to a better decision-making process that could consistently
serve the best interests of the child. In the beginning, we were not clear on exactly how this could be accomplished.

Implementation of Transactions

True to the constructivist model, we discovered that it was necessary to refine our focus as we conducted our interviews and analyzed our data. We began the first round of interviews, utilizing eight broad, open-ended questions (see Appendix C). Note-taking was the recording mode of choice throughout the study. After each interview, team members transcribed their notes into a summary of salient points that could be readily understood by other team members and then incorporated into the existing bank of data to be analyzed later.

In phase one – orientation and overview – we conducted one-on-one interviews with stakeholders in order to determine what questions needed to be answered. We began by asking open-ended questions of each participant. We also shared with them the constructions of other stakeholders and our own construction.

Modification of Transactions

In phase two – focused exploration – we identified themes that emerged and returned to our stakeholders to explore what they felt were obstacles to successful decision-making and how they thought the system could be improved (see Appendix C for second round questions).

In phase three – member check – we verified and
refined the data obtained in the previous phases, obtained additional data from a review of the literature and continued with data analysis.

Content Analysis

The process of data analysis occurred simultaneously with the data collection on an ongoing basis, as the analysis of data provided direction for the collection of data. It was through this method that the joint shared construction of permanency planning was refined and theory grounded in the data began to emerge.

In collection and analysis of data, we used the constant comparative method outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). This procedure involved unitizing and categorizing by each evaluator following data collection combined with joint team categorizing at periodic intervals.

Data analysis began with the first interviews or observations during the actual collection process. The individual evaluator began the unitizing process by recognizing themes or units of data which emerged from the interview. Each of us would then check with the source to ensure the information has been correctly interpreted.

Following each data collection activity, each evaluator recorded the units of data on index cards and categorized them according to similar themes prior to
the next data collection activity. These cards were coded according to source so that the data could be clarified at a later time if necessary.

Initially, the categories were provisional, that is, some cards appeared to fit into a category that had not yet been defined. As the process continued, we reviewed the categories and delineated category properties. When a category reached a substantial size, we reviewed the cards again to more sharply define the category properties. At this point, we wrote a provisional rule for the category and added further data included in the category that fit the provisional rule. Categories were continuously refined in this manner. Each time a category was refined, all cards in the category were reviewed to ascertain if they still fit into the new category.

After we each had established several categories, we met for the purpose of incorporating our individual categories into a shared category. This process occurred several times during the data collection/analysis phase. The team categorizing process not only served as a quality control procedure, but enabled us - as a team - to continuously determine the direction of the data collection process. As the joint categorization process proceeded, gaps in the data or incomplete categories became apparent and indicated those areas where further
data collection was needed.

The joint team decision to stop data collection/analysis was guided by the procedures set up by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Regularities began to become apparent in the categories and new data was no longer producing new information. It was at this point we made a team decision to stop data collection. All of the data in the categories provided the basis for our case report and emergent grounded theory.

**SALIENCIES**

We began this study with our own constructions about how the decision-makers made their decisions. We suspected that each of these individuals made plans for children based on their own issues with separation and loss, their personal convictions about the rights of birth parents to remain even marginally involved with their children and lastly, their own met or unmet needs as parents. In the process of questioning our respondents, however, their answers began to point to other factors that influenced their decision-making. We began to find that our decision makers were influenced not so much by their own philosophical stand or "emotional baggage", but much more so by time constraints, their interpretation of the law and by previous planning initiated early in the process (often not by them) that had already set the tone for the
child’s future.

One basic issue or saliency that came out of the data was the meaning and purpose attached to the concept of permanency planning by various participants.

**Definition and Scope of Permanency Planning**

The meaning of permanency planning was seen by our respondents in a variety of ways. It was defined as a plan, a process and an end to reunification. As a plan it was described as the "best plan" or a plan for a particular setting. It was viewed as a long term goal or living arrangement, and as a home forever or until the age of majority. One legal professional stated permanency planning means "different things depending on what DPSS (Department of Public Social Services) is intending". An adoptions social worker stated it was "a plan other than what God intended".

As a process, permanency planning was seen by legal professionals as a statutory obligation to choose a plan, a review of plans, causing minor’s needs and rights to be fulfilled according to needs and law, and "trying to do the right thing under atrocious conditions in underfunded facilities." An adoptions social worker saw it as a thoughtful process. A foster-adoptive parent felt it was a "way to keep them (children) forever".

As an end to reunification, a legal professional
saw permanency planning as an end to reuniting a child with parents while a relative guardian saw it as "...things finally being over".

The research literature outlined several definitions and ways in which to view permanency planning. Fein and Maluccio (1982) state that "...the concept of permanency planning has been introduced as a philosophy, a policy and a technique" (page 425).

In addition to the variety of views regarding the definition and scope of permanency planning, two other saliencies emerged from our interviews. These broad thematic areas, where our respondents agreed, included a consensus that every child deserved a safe and nurturing home and that the permanency planning system had several inherent conflicts. From these general areas of consensus, we identified four specific areas where the process of permanency planning could be improved. These areas include the provision for: (1) earlier permanency planning, (2) assessment of the child, (3) improved lines of communication and (4) improved training and education for both staff and caretakers.

Consensus 1 - Child’s Need for Permanence

The prevailing consensus among our respondents was that children need a safe and nurturing environment in which to grow. Without fail, our respondents identified
'belonging to a family' as being the place where this safe and nurturing environment could ideally be provided. Our respondents did not always specify whether this would be a birth, relative, foster guardian or adoptive family. The issues that led to this finding by our research team included level of commitment, belonging and being loved, attachment and bonding, and finally children's rights versus birth parent rights.

That every child deserves a safe and nurturing environment seems like a reasonable statement to emerge from a study done on and about children and their needs. The following is a more detailed exploration of the issues involved and the responses offered by our decision-makers.

The Theme of Belonging and Being Loved

All respondents felt that being part of a family was essential for growth and development of the child emotionally and spiritually. An adoptive parent said "...if you give a child a sense of permanency, they will always feel secure".

A foster parent suggested that "...without a family, a child would grow emotionally damaged and would pass that on to their own child". Another parent felt that "...the problem with children in our system...is that they do not have a family or a sense of extended family and...do not feel they belong anywhere". An adoption
social worker reflected the feelings of many respondents when she stated that "belonging to someone, a family, is the basic right of a child...something every child needs". Thus, it becomes apparent that belonging to a family gives a child a sense of connectedness and identity.

The Family As Teacher

All respondents saw belonging to a family as being the building blocks for a child's future. A protective service worker saw the family as "...a place for a child to always go back to...their safe haven". Other social work professionals saw the family as "...the cornerstone of all that we are...the building blocks of society". Caretakers and social workers agreed that "within the family, a child can learn...social behavior, to love and how to get along", "learn how to live...learn about unconditional love..."; "...(the family) may not like your behavior, but they will keep you always", "...within a family, one can be accepted as one is", according to one adoption worker. A foster parent saw the family as the place where children could be exposed to good role models like "...a happy husband and wife who would show interest and love to each other ...children will be influenced in a good way by this".

The Family as Provider

Caretakers and social work professionals felt that
the safe and nurturing family would provide the following important ingredients in a child's life: "...roots and connection", "they would shape morality and create responsibility", "give a child strength of character and self-esteem" and would "give a sense of security". The ideal family would "...let the child know that they are important and accepted", which all respondents felt was a major ingredient in producing a child who could be happy and productive in life.

The Family As Role Model

Some respondents outlined concrete examples of how a family could mold a child and his future by setting a good example. Our respondents cited belonging to a church-family, teaching values and morality, and demonstrating love and respect for each other as the invaluable role that a family played in a child's life. One foster parent predicted that "...if a child does not belong to a family he/she won't recognize the need for stability, love and family support". As one legal professional stated "...it is important for children to live among people who love and are kind to them". This professional felt that such role modeling and interaction set the stage for the child and his or her future interactions with others.

What Kind of Family Does A Child Need?

From a child's point of view, our respondents
stated that a family does not have to be the family of origin, but "...children need to learn that someone will be there to take care of them". A child "...needs people to rely on, whenever..." and "kids want to be loved", according to various caretakers. "They need to belong to someone" and "kids need a stable family where they know that what you say is going to happen, will indeed happen", stated caretakers who felt that reliability of parental figures was sorely needed by the children that they care for. "Kids want to belong" and "being in a family has helped them to evolve into more secure people" according to several caretakers.

So, if belonging to a family - any safe and nurturing family - is a child's birthright, why do some decision-makers perceive a difference between birth, relative, foster, guardian and adoptive families? Certainly, the connectedness that a child has with each of these kinds of families is different, physically and legally. Children are biologically and legally connected to their birth or relative families. They share common genes, appearance, history and name. Foster, guardian and adoptive families are connected only by some degree of legality, and, in some instances, some intangible feeling of "connectedness" or "belonging" to each other. Our respondents saw a variety of commitment levels or sense of belonging that children could have in these widely disparate families.
In the literature, Allen and Golobeck (1985) state that permanency planning should encourage "the protection of children and their families" (page 156). Fein, Maluccio, Hamilton and Ward (1983) indicate that the "child's and the parents or caretakers sense of permanence rather than the legal status of the placement seemed to be most closely related to the child's well-being" (page 492).

Birth Parents As Family

The focus of the reunification system is to get children and birth parents back together, if possible. All of our respondents had strong feelings about separating birth parents and children. Although some were ambivalent, most caretakers of the children felt that the system leans too far towards the parents' rights over those of the children. Because they lived with the children 24 hours a day, they felt they were more aware of the state of uncertainty that children are subjected to, not knowing if or when they will return to their parents. This uncertainty interferes with the children's ability to grieve and resolve their losses or to move on to a place where they are able to trust and attach to a family again. Legal and social work professionals had misgivings, but felt justified in separating children and families when danger to the child was involved, but some had more difficulty
accepting and initiating the legal proceedings (termination of parental rights). When social work and legal professionals expressed concern over the separation of parent and child, it generally resulted from the professional's feeling that they were interfering with the natural order of things "...what God intended". Some legal and social work professionals also felt they needed to look closely at their own values and not make judgment of parents based on differences in values, nor should they set parents up to fail reunification.

Parental Rights

Caregivers of the children saw things differently. "If the parent can protect and provide, they should have the child...otherwise, they should not". "Birth parent rights aren't haphazardly taken. They are given due process and this is good". "Parents are human...they make mistakes and should have a chance...but no more than one or two chances". "Often they do care, but they shouldn't be parenting". "Stop the cycle...parents should have a chance, but then it should stop...no more back and forth". If parents cannot meet society's minimum acceptable level of care, then kids should be removed". "Parents have already failed". "Parents have been given all the chances". As one legal professional
stated, "We should protect the child, not the relationship".

Termination of Parental Rights

Many respondents supported removal of the child from the birth parent by looking at the child’s rights. "Parents have a responsibility; kids can’t be put on hold until a parent gets their act together". "Some people aren’t capable of raising children". "Anyone can have a child...that doesn’t mean they should be able to keep them". "Birth parent rights should not take precedence over the child’s right to happiness and security". "We get caught up in the legal rights of birth parents...the kids suffer".

Relatives as Family

If the birth parents cannot provide a safe, nurturing environment, who else could? The literature supports a close look at relatives. After all, relatives share a family history, name and genetic pool. Who better to help a child "belong"? In their three-year longitudinal study of permanency planning, Fein, Maluccio, Hamilton and Ward (1983) found that children who had been in foster placements with relatives immediately before the permanent placement were adjusting better than those who had been in a non-relative foster or residential home. Also, "children in placement with relatives had the highest adjustment scores" (page 514). They felt we should pay more attention in practice and in research to
the "kinship system" that existed for the child (page 523). Other researchers [Baran, Pannor and Sorosky (1976), Ishisaka (1978) and Walker (1981)] suggest that the concept of permanency planning itself "...should be broadened to encompass placement with the extended family system rather than simply the nuclear family" (page 552). Fialkov (1988) states that "every effort (should be) made to return the child to his or her family of origin once out-of-home placement has been made" (page 343).

A relative/guardian respondent saw her built-in connectedness to the child as significant, but other caregivers stated relatives had not been available to the children they cared for, thus relatives were not placement resources. Another caretaker did state that she often utilized the relatives to intercede with birth parents and/or with the court to encourage that services be requested that would benefit the child when the system had somehow let her down.

Adoption as Family: Sense of Connectedness

So, if there is no blood tie, how do children feel that they belong to a family whose ties are legal? Respondents had a variety of answers to the question of "belonging" and "commitment level" of caretakers. Not surprisingly, social work and legal professionals, and
adoptive or foster-adoptive parents saw adoption as the program that made the largest commitment legally by the parents to the children "...because now the law recognized the children as if they were born to them". As one adoption worker stated, "with adoption, the legal commitment goes hand in hand with one’s heart feelings". Other responses included "adoption is like falling in love...it is a feeling". The commitment level is seen as greater between parent and child because "...adoptive parents come to the agency wanting to adopt a child". Adoption is a commitment that continues through adult life...we will be grandparents to these children’s children». Adoptive parents are seen as giving a child a "total, full, ultimate, emotional, financial, legal, moral, never ‘bail out’ commitment". Eagle (1990) states "...that adoption is superior to other forms of care is....based upon empirical studies" (page 121).

The Guardian as Family

Guardianship was seen as a lesser level of commitment to a child in that birth parent rights were not terminated, just temporarily suspended, so a child really belonged to two families. One caretaker described guardianship (and foster care) "...like planning for the divorce when you marry". Although several respondents felt that when children were older, guardianship was the best plan because it afforded the child some degree of
protection, but did not sever, either legally or emotionally, the child's bond with their birth parent. One caretaker stated, "It creates a legal bond which means more...it is an outward sign of connection".

The Foster Family as Family

Foster care received very mixed reviews in terms of the perceived commitment level of the foster parents. Foster parent respondents stated there was no difference in their level of commitment for foster children than there was for their own children. This view was shared by all foster parents interviewed. They stated that when the children came into their homes, they felt that they became the child's parents. It was noteworthy, however, that several of our foster parents had chosen to make more of a legal commitment by taking guardianship or adoption of the children in their care. So, although our respondents voiced that there should be no difference in commitment level of parents to foster children, there did indeed appear to be one.

All other respondents, while acknowledging a need for children to have the safe harbor and protection of foster care, saw the program as being temporary in nature and not a good long-term plan for children. The perceived problems included seeing the child as "...not a family member", the fact that caretakers get paid and the fact
that the foster parents can ask that a child to be moved. It was described by social workers as a "revolving door", "...conditional, upon the child's behavior". One protective service worker said, "Foster parents do not make a permanent commitment when obtaining a foster care license...it's meant to be temporary care". An adoption worker stated, "...foster care is like couples who live together and never marry...it can easily be undone".

**Commitment As A Heart Issue Rather A Than Legal Issue**

Not everyone saw the commitment issue in foster care in terms of either black and white. A protective service worker suggested that "...even if it is long-term foster care, if it's a family where the child can be loved, the child can define themselves in the family". Another protective service worker said that "...some foster parents accept the child as their own as soon as the child comes in". A relative/guardian caretaker said, "I don’t think the children perceive the difference if they are wanted". A foster parent said that "...it is important that the child belong to both the birth and foster family". A legal professional suggested however that "...institutionalizing kids in foster care enables them to look for further institutionalization in adulthood".

**Foster Home Commitment and the Child's Identity**

Many of our respondents cited commitment problems
in foster care from the child's point of view. These problems often coincided with a child's sense of his own identity based on where he belonged. Concerns were expressed that foster care makes kids different and therefore, not OK within themselves about themselves. Caretakers and professionals expressed, "The child perceives a difference", "...it does not give them a sense of belonging because their different name has to be explained in school and to doctors and they have to explain why social workers come to see them... kids know whether they are adopted or in foster care".

Conclusions

Although there is a variety of opinions, all of our respondents wanted children to have a safe and nurturing environment in which to grow. How one defines that environment did not hinge so much on the biological or legal relationship between the child and family, but more on the child's sense of belonging, of being accepted and wanted by that family. The family needed to "claim" the child to be part of their lives and the child needed to be able to accept that this was his family. It was clear that most respondents perceived that children "knew when they belonged" and although the home might not be affluent, or the caretakers might receive money to care for the child, it was the "heart feelings" that
made the difference to the child. However, many suggested, and we would agree, that the legal commitment to the child was an outward sign of the heart feelings of the family toward the child. In this way, a child could be provided a safe and nurturing environment, a family, protected both by the family’s sense of commitment and the full support of the law.

As strongly as our respondents felt that every child deserved a safe and nurturing environment, they had equally strong opinions regarding the inherent problems in our current permanency planning process.

**Consensus 2 – Conflicts in Permanency Planning**

Five identifiable areas of conflict emerged from our data. These were (1) family and parent issues, (2) relative issues, (3) foster parent issues, (4) social worker issues, and (5) legal issues.

**Family and Parent Issues**

Some felt one general system problem was that not enough effort was being made to keep families out of the system. Legal professionals and caretakers both suggested more services aimed at prevention of abuse and out-of-home care. Some caretakers and several social workers supported family preservation. Caretakers, legal professionals and current research literature point out that prevention is cost effective.
In addition to prevention, permanency planning was expanded by our participants to include reunification with parents. Many of the concerns about parents centered around separation and reunification issues. The other major considerations regarding parents were the termination of parental rights and the rights of parents versus the rights of children.

All participant groups supported the reunification process. They approved of laws that protected due process and parent’s rights to reunification. Some adoption social workers, however, expressed concern that not enough is being done to help parents reunify with their children. Some of the comments made were that: "...we set parents up to fail", "we are not realistic about what is expected from parents" and that, "...we fail to account sufficiently for different parenting skills and values".

Separation Issues

Everyone agreed that children suffer a great deal of pain and loss when separated from their families. Most respondents felt that the necessity to separate a parent and child was repugnant and went against the natural order of the universe. However, when a child was endangered, their need to protect the child outweighed their reluctance to separate children from their families. A relative caretaker and a social worker felt it was easier
to separate younger children from parents.

Respondents from professional participant groups expressed more emotional difficulty with physical separation than caretaker participants. While caretakers also expressed concerns about birth parents' feelings, living with the children convinced them that children needed more than those birth parents could provide in terms of stability, safety and nurturing.

Termination of Parental Rights

There was disagreement among participant groups and individuals regarding legal separation or termination of parental rights. Social workers expressed less difficulty with termination of parental rights than with initial physical separation. This appeared to be attributed to the belief that parents had been given a chance through the reunification process. One adoption social worker stated, "legally, I don't have as much trouble...they need a safe place". Also, a protective service worker stated, "by the time it's legal, I feel it's the right decision."

Likewise, some legal professionals expressed no difficulty with termination of parental rights. One legal professional stated, "a birth parent is always a birth parent...the termination (of parental rights) is only a legal piece of paper". Also from a legal professional, "...we should protect the child, not the
relationship".

Other legal professionals expressed concern that termination happens too soon and too often. Some legal professionals and some adoption social workers worried that children were declared adoptable too soon before the extent of their behavioral problems were known.

Caretakers, on the other hand, felt that termination of parental rights should happen quickly so that children can be placed in a permanent home sooner. An adoption worker felt that the changes enacted by Senate Bill 243 allows termination to happen sooner which equals greater continuity for kids. One protective service social worker felt the termination of parental rights should not happen at all with kids who will not be adopted due to physical or behavioral problems.

A protective service social worker and a legal professional felt that termination of parental rights should be delayed until finalization of adoption. The argument offered is that the child ends up becoming a legal orphan.

Parents’ versus Children’s Rights

The issue of parents’ rights versus children’s rights emerged from our data. All participant groups agreed children have rights. A social worker stated, "...kids have rights to a permanent plan". A legal professional
stated, "minors have a right to have a plan made for them".

However, the pattern of caretakers being more clearly focused on the child remained. Caretakers tended to agree that the rights of children should be considered above the rights of birth parents. Most caretakers felt we lean too far toward the parents' rights over those of children. One foster-adoptive parent stated, "birth parent rights should not take precedence over a child's right to happiness and security".

Respondents from the professional groups, while acknowledging children's rights, appear to struggle more with balancing the rights of both parents and children. One social worker stated, "we get caught up in the legal rights of birth parents (and)...the kids suffer".

Relative Issues

As outlined previously in this paper on page 24, both the literature review and our respondents supported the importance of the role of relatives. All participants tended to agree relatives are usually the best placement option. Legal professionals, in particular, voiced specific areas of concern regarding relatives. One legal professional felt there is not enough effort made to find and place with relatives. Another stated that relatives "...are held to too high a standard".

Another legal professional felt that DPSS needs to
eliminate it’s "all or nothing approach regarding relatives". In order words, if relatives are involved, it has to be as a placement. Social workers and caretakers agreed that enlisting the help of children’s relatives for transportation, visitation and going to court was a good idea. A legal professional was concerned about too much relative involvement, stating, "relatives need to be involved to the extent they do not interfere with the process".

A specific area of concern expressed regarding relatives focused on siblings. Legal professionals believe that there is not enough effort to keep siblings together. A legal professional stated, "a minor has a right to be placed with siblings."

**Foster Parent Issues**

Regarding foster parents, the caretaker respondents had complaints about the system and social workers. Professionals had concerns regarding foster parents and foster care in general. A relative guardian felt the system makes foster parents feel like glorified babysitters and foster parents’ opinions are discounted.

A concern for both legal professionals and social workers is that the system stands between the foster parents and the child, thus lowering the commitment level of the foster parents, when long-term foster care is the
permanent plan. One foster parent expressed concern that the system fails to adequately screen foster parents. Social workers were concerned that foster parents motivations and needs were not assessed when considering them for permanent placement.

Some foster parents expressed disagreement with the requirement to make ethnically matched placements. They did not see the need for such matching as they felt that they can meet the needs of children placed in their care regardless of race or ethnicity.

Legal professionals and social workers expressed concerns about foster parent roles. For example, some said that foster parents have a great deal of power with respect to birth parent visits. Another respondent stated that foster parents come into the agency to provide temporary care and end up adopting. Or, that foster parents lose sight of the fact that they are temporary caretakers and thwart the reunification process. The length of placement determines the degree of right of foster parents.

Thus, we see one of our respondent's primary concerns focused on the role of caretakers. Foster parents felt their role was not appreciated. The system fails to hear them and stands between them and the children. Professionals felt foster parents were not clear about the temporary nature of their role as caretakers. They also
felt the system fails to respond adequately to foster parents who wish to become permanent caretakers. Clearly, these responses point to a need for improved communication and role clarification, especially for foster parents.

Regarding foster parenting and long term foster care as a permanent plan, at least half of the professional respondents complained that it is not really permanent. Continued placement is conditional upon the child’s behavior and kids know they may be moved. An additional concern on the part of some social workers was that some homes end up with a mixture of adoption, guardianship and foster kids and that is not fair to the foster children. They wonder why some children get to stay forever while they may not.

The above speaks to the need for better assessment when considering long-term foster care as the permanent plan. Decision-makers must be aware of the inherent limitations of foster care in terms of permanency.

Social Worker Issues

Social workers were criticized in several areas. Most caretakers, especially foster parents, felt that social workers were not interested in their input about children placed in their care. Other caretakers said social workers "...do not care", "...do not always have the best interest of the child at heart", "...are
demanding and manipulative", "...do not establish rapport with the foster parent" and, "...fail to make sure the foster parent gets paid".

One legal professional felt social workers do not try as hard to reunify white babies with their birth families due to better adoption opportunities available for them. A few social workers expressed concern that some worker's personal backgrounds and subjective feelings get in the way of making good decisions.

Others felt the lack of communication between people in the system was a problem. Specifically cited by social workers was the lack of communication between Child Protective Services and Adoptions. Lack of open lines of communication between social workers and parents during the reunification process was a concern to a legal professional.

Again, there is clearly a focus on the part of our respondents about communication between caretakers and social workers, as well as between social workers in Child Protective Services and Adoptions. Regarding assessment, there was concern that personal agendas are being served rather than the needs of the child.

On a more positive note, most caretakers tended to think social workers were required to "...do too much". One caretaker observed social workers to be polite and professional while another thought social workers put
the best interest of the child first.

In their own defense, social workers felt they take their role seriously, feel confident in their decisions, make the best decisions possible and provide good service and education.

Legal System Issues

Concerns about the legal system focused on the law and the court. Some social workers felt there was inherent conflict built into the system as a result of the inflexibility of the law. "As a result of law, we have a conflict with the system, court and attorneys... regarding the best interest of the child".

Regarding the court, an adoption social worker and a foster-adoptive parent were weary of too many continuances and the long and difficult legal process. Another relative caretaker felt birth parents were able to abuse the court system to buy more time.

Conclusions

In general, everyone agreed that there are conflicts built into the system that interfere with it's effectiveness. One relative/guardian said, "...it's not the people in the system that are the problem, it's the system itself".

It is unlikely that all of the identified conflicts in the system can be resolved. However, if all of the
decision-makers focus on the needs of the child, the process of planning permanency for children can be improved.

**Outcomes: Findings**

From the two broad thematic areas discussed above, four findings emerged that point to a better way of planning permanency for children in the future. These were:

1. Early and continued permanency planning.


4. Better training for professionals and caretakers.

**Finding 1 – Early and Continued Permanency Planning**

*Reasons for Early Permanency Planning*

Our respondents agreed and the literature supported the finding that permanency planning needs to begin early and should continue past implementation of the selected plan.

The identified reasons to begin permanency planning early include: (1) minimizing changes in placement, (2) more quickly identifying and engaging the support of extended
family, and (3) earlier resolution of the role that the current caretaker will play in the child’s future.

Concerns About Frequent Changes in Placement

Much of the identified need for early permanency planning is based on the child’s need to belong to a family and for that to occur as early in the process as possible. In addition, respondents were concerned about how frequent changes of placements affect children. The literature review also raised concerns about the frequency and timing of placement.

Both adoption and protective service social workers agree that disruption of placement is an extremely painful occurrence to both the family and the child and frequently impairs the child’s ability to attach again. Legal professionals tended to view disruption as usually preventable.

Findings in the literature show that age and placement history variables have a major impact on outcome. Children with more previous placements had lower outcome scores (Fein, et al., 1983). Additionally, findings support the importance of carefully exploring and evaluating what is the best initial placement for a child, hence avoiding additional changes in placement (Fein, et al., 1983). The need to consider relatives for permanent placement or at least identify what role they can have in the life of a child, suggests that in order to achieve an adequate
assessment, the process must begin early.

Also, in regard to assessment and evaluation, was the concern that foster parents or caretakers are not adequately screened, assessed or matched for permanency, which again, suggests a need for permanency planning to begin early.

Suggestions for Implementing Early Permanency Planning

Direct suggestions from participants in the professional groups regarding the facilitation of earlier permanency planning included process changes in both DPSS and the Court. All adoption social workers and some protective service social workers said we should start permanency planning at the point of intake. This would facilitate obtaining birth family medical and social history and other relative information.

A focus for change to be implemented within DPSS centered on the concept of formalized staff meetings regarding permanency planning. One protective service social worker suggested this meeting occur after the Dispositional Hearing at the point of transfer to the carrier worker. Another suggested that this meeting take place between the six and twelve month Review Hearings and include line staff and supervision from both protective services and adoptions.

A legal professional advocated for more intensive
services between disposition and the six month review and that parental compliance then be weighed more heavily at the six month review. In cases with a demonstrated lack of compliance with reunification services, the focus should then shift from the parent to the child in the last six month period.

Other suggestions offered by legal professionals focused on streamlining the court process by reducing the actual time it takes to complete the Jurisdictional Hearing, thereby offering services sooner. Also suggested was that routine permanency planning reviews be accomplished as a non-appearance matter, thereby freeing up court time. It was suggested that the reunification service plan be developed and submitted by the carrier worker (as a non-appearance matter) within thirty days of disposition. This would provide better continuity of services. Foster-adoptive parents and some social workers felt that orders allowing permanent placement should be granted sooner in order to ensure more stability for the child.

Continued Permanency Planning

A major concern by professionals was that permanency planning ended with the implementation hearing. Long-term foster care was not considered a good or permanent plan by many of our respondents. Some professionals felt that permanency planning should continue past the implementation hearing when long term foster care was ordered as the plan.
It was felt that more effort should be made to locate adoptive families or guardians for those dependents.

Another area of concern identified in regard to continued permanency planning was the lack of post-placement services. A legal professional felt that plans fail for preventable reasons. Both protective service and adoption social workers advocated for more and longer follow-up support services after the plan of adoption is implemented. Current literature also supports post adoptive support services (Argent, 1984).

**Finding 2 — Bio-Psycho-Social-Cultural Assessment**

Respondent concern regarding early permanency planning was tied to the identified need for an early and comprehensive assessment of each child’s individual needs. **Focus on Child**

One fundamental issue that emerged almost immediately in our data collection and analysis was the notion that in the business of child welfare services, the child should be the focus, the primary client. Responses indicated that this is not happening. One social worker commented that workers "...don’t know many of the children in their caseload." Another social worker said that we have lost sight of our focus on the child, that we give "lip service" to serving the child, "... we say
that the child is our primary client, but in reality, we tend to serve the best interest of the child’s parent or caretaker”.

Mandatory response to legal deadlines was the reason many social work participants gave as the reason why the child is either no longer or has never been the primary focus in child welfare services. Respondents indicated that priorities have always been related to large caseloads, court deadlines, foster parent demands and reunification activities, not the child-in-system for long-term.

Assessment of Child

Consistent with this expressed need for a primary focus on the child was the simultaneous emergence of the view that an early, and continuous bio-psycho-social-cultural assessment is needed for every child that enters the system. When a child comes into care, we should know their health history, likes and dislikes and have some knowledge of their individuality, such as whether they like to sleep with a night light on or have a favorite story they like to hear at bedtime.

Respondents said that in order to serve the best interest of the child, decision-makers need to consider such things as siblings, birth order, the nature of their relationships with parents, other relatives and caretakers, child’s physical and psychological needs, and the potential emotional damage that may occur in moving the child. These
are all assessment issues.

Social workers wanted to know whether a particular child has established support systems in their life and, if not, can these be established through foster care or adoption? Are there relatives who can be caretakers or fill some other role in their life? They also indicated that assessment should start at the very beginning and continue to evolve as long as the child remains in the system.

The research literature also pointed to a need for the individual assessment of children in the system. Fein, Miller, Olmstead and Howe (1984) describe assessment as critical piece in providing an overall plan for the child. Among several areas they felt needed to be assessed were "... obstacles to a return home, and the needs of a child as a result of family disruption..." (page 354).

Gambrill and Stein (1985) identify the "... use of accurate assessment methods .... as one important ingredient of social work practice that will facilitate permanency planning" (page 186).

Because the issues of attachment, separation, loss, and grieving are continuously interwoven in our data, we have included these issues as needing to be addressed in the process of evaluating the child during the
assessment process.

Respondent statements corresponded with the information gathered from the literature review. Maluccio and Fein (1987) state that:

"...Ultimately, the choice of a permanent plan for a particular child should be based on knowledge and empirical evidence. However, our basic values about bonding, nurturing, and stability should guide our decisions until our information is complete" (page 547).

Based on the data gathered and supported by the literature, it seems imperative that a complete bio-psycho-social-cultural assessment be completed for every child in care. This will help to ensure that the needs of the child remain paramount.

Finding 3 - Better Communication Among Decision-Makers

Everyone interviewed agreed that a significant source of conflict in the system is the lack of communication between the decision-makers. Some suggested that earlier and continuous communication needs to occur between protective service and adoption social workers. Legal professionals pointed out that open communication between social workers, birth parents and foster parents is an important ingredient in successful reunification. Lack of communication results in unrealistic expectations and a significant negative impact on permanency planning for
the child. How, then, can we improve communication and positively impact children's lives?

The Interdisciplinary Team Concept

The research literature supported communication enhancement and use of an interdisciplinary team approach among child welfare services staff. Fein, Miller, Olmstead and Howe (1984) comment on the need for "...assessing the potential treatment and resource environment contacting other providers working on a case (and) determining what services and resources are usefully available" (page 354).

Gambrill and Stein (1985) have concerns that staff often have few supports or networking abilities built into the permanency planning process. In their thesis on permanency planning, they state, "...staff...have few, if any, opportunities to discuss mutual concerns in a supportive atmosphere that will encourage a spirit of working together toward shared aims. They suggest "...provision of effective services to children and their families requires effective relationships and service patterns that complement, rather than cancel or conflict with each other" (page 253).

Just as the literature supported more open communication between caseworkers, our respondents identified similar needs. Adoption social workers viewed their own thinking process in terms of permanency planning
and 'long-term', while they viewed the thinking of protective service workers in terms of 'emergency' and 'short-term'. This was not necessarily a false perception, but if it is true, then an understanding of these different perspectives would be a starting point for these two disciplines to begin planning cooperatively for a child's future.

Social Workers as Team Members

Some adoption workers pointed out the importance of "...team assessment and evaluation in the matching process", so that children would be placed with appropriate families. A foster parent suggested that we fit the social worker to the child as well as fitting the child to the home. The foster parent felt that this could be accomplished by utilizing "...a parent-oriented worker and a child-oriented worker". The foster parent felt that each member of the focus group (parent and child) could then be truly represented by their social worker without a conflict in meeting that client's needs.

A protective service worker suggested "formalized staffing at the point where the case is transferred to a carrier worker". A protective service worker went a step further to suggest that the "...formalized staffing (should include) supervision, fellow line staff and adoption staff at some point between the six and twelve
month review". It was also suggested by the same social worker that protective service workers and adoption social workers make joint home visits and confer on cases more closely.

**Foster Parents as Team Members**

Most caretakers, especially foster parents, felt that social workers were not interested in their input about children placed with them. They felt that social workers and foster parents needed to confer regularly to discuss the needs of the child. "Social workers should listen to and pay attention (to the foster parent) because ...(they) are with the child all the time".

Some adoption workers pointed out the importance of "team assessment and evaluation in the matching process". A protective services worker suggested "...formalized staffing at the point where the case is transferred to a carrier worker"

One foster parent suggested that we fit the social worker to the child as well as fitting the child to the family. A similar point was made by one legal professional when suggesting the use of "...a parent-oriented worker and child-oriented worker".

A protective services suggested "formalized staffing with supervision, fellow line staff and adoption between six and twelve month review". It was also a protective service worker who suggested adoption and protective service
workers make joint home visits and confer on cases more closely. A legal professional recognized that foster parents are "...an under-utilized resource". He stated, "Foster parents are the eyes and ears of the social worker...but no one listens to them". He also felt that "...foster parents hold a lot of power in regard to birth parent visits and reunification".

Caretakers in general (foster parents specifically) felt that they are the most involved with children and the least heard in terms of planning for them or having any input.

Finding 4 - Training for Professionals and Caretakers

When we began our study, we surmised that educational issues regarding permanency planning would emerge. It was our premise that much education would need to be done in terms of the self-awareness of the decision makers. What drove them to choose this permanent plan over another? However, as our interviews progressed, it became evident that the educational issues for all decision makers needed to be much more basic. All members of the decision making process needed to become more aware of the mechanics and the importance of the stages of human development and how these impacted the child. In addition, our decision-makers needed to understand and respect each other's roles in the
process more completely.

We also discovered a basic philosophical difference among social work staff. Protective service workers focused more on short-term crisis intervention whereas adoption workers looked at long-term placement. Surely each set of workers needed to look at the immediacy of here and now, but also be aware of the big picture of permanence. And how do we interface the court demands with the demands of the child's needs? Gambrill (1983) states that the:

"...use of permanency planning procedures will require effective training programs designed to increase related attitudes, beliefs and skills. Proposed programs can be reviewed to determine whether these include important components, such as clear description of objectives and progress indicators and constructive feedback. Additional attention to enhancing skills in stress management, clear thinking and group process will facilitate permanency planning for children" (page 240).

Gambrill and Stein (1985) report that in twenty years of research studies done on permanency planning they have identified several factors that impede good permanency planning for children. One of these factors is "...deficiencies in in-service training" (page 243).

What educational needs exist within San Bernardino County DPSS? Foster parents complain about the strict requirement for ethnic placements. They say that the children "...should be in any home where their needs are met". An adoptive parent is upset that "...the length of
placement determines the degree of right that the foster parent has to keep the child". Another foster parent complains that "...the attorney for the child has never laid eyes on the child and they don't talk to me...how can they make plans for my child?" Another foster parent says that "...the kids are torn between my home and the birth parent...how can I help them to work through that?"

**Education Focused on the Best Interest of the Child**

Clearly these concerns would lead us to conclude that DPSS needs to put more emphasis on training that would include "best interest of the child" issues. Why would an ethnically similar home be in the best interest of the child? When would it not? Who can determine the degree of attachment a child feels in a particular home? Is length of time in the home the only criteria to consider? Do attorneys make decisions based only on the law they represent, or on the child's needs? Do they need to have met the child, or could they make their decision based on the social worker's report which was written with foster-parent input? What about the issues of separation and loss? How do you help a child work through these losses? Most social work professionals and some caretakers feel that more training was needed for caretakers on child development issues and adoption.

**Educational Needs for Decision-Makers**

Clearly, foster parents are team members. They need
a clearer understanding of the system, their role and the "best interest of the child" issues within that system. Likewise, social workers need to see not only their small piece of the system, but the big picture and how it relates to the child. In response to question about how to improve the system, adoption workers commented that permanency planning training needed to be provided for protective service workers, even those in intake positions. One protective service worker said that there is adequate training on how to remove children and agreed that more training is needed on permanency planning: "We make quality removals, but not quality plans". Both adoption and protective service workers felt that there should be more information and training available on permanency planning resources, such as relatives and foster-adoption choices. Most social work staff indicated that they need more training on how to prepare children for long-term care and help children give up their fantasies of returning home.

The data has led us to the conclusion that the training needs of the agency should be more child-focused. Social workers are charged with the overwhelming task of "playing God" in children's lives. They need training that will assist them in making complete and thorough assessment of an individual child's needs so that they can make the best permanent plan for that child. They need
training in child development in order to understand the impact of changes on the child's life. Caretakers need child-focused training to help them accept these children where they are, help them to talk about their losses and to grieve them. They need to help children prepare to move on (either back home or to a permanent placement) or to begin the slow process of attachment within the caretaker family. Caretakers also need to understand their role within the system; to see themselves as advocates for the child and to work as team members to actualize the best interest of each individual child.

**DISCUSSION**

**Summary**

Identification and assessment of child abuse and neglect has long been the subject matter of child welfare services research, literature and training. The area of permanency planning has been less of a focus in Child Welfare Services with the exception of identifying the problem of foster care drift.

The response to foster care drift was to legally mandate specific permanent plans for court dependents and time frames for their implementation. However, the quality of those plans and the decision making process for determining those plans have been largely ignored.
The entire concept of permanency planning is becoming more of a focus in child welfare services. A universal theme in the emerging focus on permanency planning is that the scope of permanency planning needs to be broadened beyond the selection and implementation of a specific plan for a child.

Our study of permanency planning in San Bernardino County child welfare services was in agreement with the concept of broadening the scope of permanency planning. Further, it accomplished two things. It identified areas of agreement and disagreement among the permanency planning decision-makers, both professionals and caretakers. And, it revealed four specific areas in which the process of permanency planning can be improved in order to better serve the best interest of the child.

It was not surprising that the body of participants in the decision-making process of permanency planning felt that serving the best interest of the child should be the ultimate goal of our agency. However, there were some clear lines of distinction in some areas between the caretaker and professional respondents.

Universally held was the concept that belonging to a family, birth or otherwise, was of utmost importance in the life of a child. It was only when the setting and the avenues in which this could be accomplished was addressed that divergent ideas and beliefs emerged.
Along those lines, the respondents in our study had strong feelings that permanency planning as a process was problematic and could be improved. Many of the respondents offered thoughtful and concrete suggestions to address identified problematic areas.

It is from our respondent's direct suggestions, along with our analysis and interpretation of the data and our review of the current research literature on that we arrived at the following joint constructs and recommendations for improving the permanency planning process.

**Recommendations**

As a result of our study, we propose the following underlying assumptions, practice theories and goals regarding permanency planning:

1. Children have a need and a right to a safe and nurturing environment.
2. Conflicts in the system and between the decision-makers are inherent in the permanency planning process. A continuous effort is required if we are to identify and resolve these conflicts.

It is from the above thematic areas that we, the evaluators, make the following specific recommendations to improve the permanency planning process in the
We believe these four major findings, which were the joint constructs of our research participant/stakeholders, will uphold the aforementioned goals, practice theories and underlying assumptions.

1. Permanency planning should begin early. A child's options for permanence in lieu of return to parents should be identified early. Predetermined time frames should be set for the purpose of meeting to review cases of children in care. It is suggested that these meetings occur after the Dispositional Hearing and before the twelve month review. They may occur more than once during the reunification process. Ideally, a meeting to address permanency issues would be held prior to the six month review for children who are not being returned home. Specifically at this time, we should look at permanency planning for children based on parental non-compliance with reunification services.

2. A thorough bio-psycho-social-cultural assessment should be completed for every child who enters the system. This should be accomplished as part of the intake process. The assessment should be ongoing and utilized as a tool in determining the child's permanent plan. It is suggested that the assessment
process be enhanced by adoption social workers assuming a more active role in the assessment of children, as well as relatives and caretakers identified as possible permanent placement resources.

3. Communication needs to be more open and regular between the parties involved in the permanency planning process. It is suggested that interdisciplinary teams be formed, consisting of representatives from both line and supervision staff from Child Protective Services and Adoption Services. The team should also include the child’s caretaker(s). Team meetings would be scheduled for the purpose of identifying and assessing the child’s options for permanence, based on the best interest of the child model.

4. More inclusive and intense education and training is needed for professionals and caretakers. Decision-makers would benefit from a better understanding of attachment, separation and loss issues as they affect the child in permanency planning. Foster parents need clarification of their role in the process and specific ways in which to help the child in their care to prepare
for permanency. Social workers from both
Child Protective Services and Adoptions could
benefit from a clearer understanding of the ways
in which they both serve children and their
families.

It is our hope that these recommendations will be
considered for implementation by San Bernardino County
Department of Public Social Services.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

In this research project, we uncovered some important
ingredients in planning permanency for children. We
consulted the literature, social work and legal
professionals and caretakers of children. The population
that we did not involve in our project were the children
themselves. Although we, as adults, professionals and
parents, have many thoughts about what might be "in the
best interest of the child", what do the children think?
How does permanency planning affect them? What are the
pros and cons of separating them from their birth
families? How do they measure the commitment of their
caretakers? How important is this commitment? Do they
ever feel like they belong, or do they go through life
feeling motherless and abandoned?

We would suggest that a look at permanency planning
from the perspective of children would be valuable. We would however, caution that supports need to be built in to deal with any feelings of separation, loss and anger that might arise from the direct or indirect probing of the children's past.

With careful planning and supportive services to deal with any feelings that such an inquiry might provoke, meaningful information could be obtained. Perhaps with this addition of the child's perspective, we would be better equipped to conduct careful and beneficial permanency planning for children.
APPENDIX A - Informed Consent and Debriefing Statement

Dear Participant,

As graduate students at CSUSB Department of Social Work, we are studying the factors that go into the permanency planning decisions that are made on behalf of court-dependent children. We are interested in how YOU have been involved in that decision-making process.

We would like you to participate in an interview that will take no more than an hour of your time. We want you to share your feelings and experiences about adopting, assuming guardianship or fostering a child, or how you participate in making those plans for children that you serve in a professional manner. Your participation is entirely voluntary and will have no negative impact upon your relationship with DPSS or any benefits that you may be receiving. You may refuse to answer any question and may stop the interview at any time. Your identity will be held in strictest confidence unless you request otherwise.

We are interested in learning and recording your perceptions and impressions about permanency planning. We will also share with you our own perceptions and the thoughts of others who are involved in permanency
planning. Because we believe your experiences and ideas are important, we will be anonymously and confidentially sharing your responses with other participants in the study.

When we have completed our study, we will invite you to a shared dialog which will be a meeting of all participants. We will give each of you a written report indicating both shared constructions and areas of dissension. We will utilize dialog to negotiate those differences in opinion, keeping in mind our ultimate goal, which is to make the best possible permanency-planning decisions and thus serve the best interest of court-dependent children in our county. Thank you for your time and patience in talking with us.

Martha P. Allen          Donna J. Holden          Sunni L. Reed

Teresa Morris PhD., Research Advisor
CSUSB, Department of Social Work

Complete results of this study will be available after June 15, 1993. If you want more information at any time regarding the content of this study, please contact Dr. Teresa Morris at (714) 880-5501.
If the interview questions raised any issues for you that you want to discuss please contact Kevin Lee at (619) 243-8885 if you are a foster parent and Martha Allen at (714) 387-5240 if you are an adoptive parent. Other participants may adoptive parent. Other participants may contact Sunni Reed at (714) 387-5312 or Donna Holden at (619) 243-8804.

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<th>Name of Participant</th>
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APPENDIX B - Participants

Some respondents did not fit into a single participant group in the hermeneutic dialectic circle. Many had more than one role, sometimes functioning as both professionals and caretakers. In addition, some had experience in their own family background related to adoption, guardianship or foster care.

Social workers had the following experiences or roles:

1. In Adoptions, they studied families, worked with birth parents and children, specialized in placing children, worked for a private adoption agency.
2. In Child Protective Services, they performed intake and carrier functions.
3. In their personal life, they were foster parents, adoptive parents or raised by a relative other than their own birth parents.

Child caretakers had the following experiences or roles:

1. As caretakers, they were foster parents, legal guardians, adoptive parents (Fos-dopt, independent), and relative guardians.
2. In their personal life, they were adopted as a child or had some other family experience with legal guardianship or foster care.

Legal Professionals:

1. As attorneys, they represented both children and birth parents.
2. In their personal life, their spouse was adopted.
APPENDIX C - Interview Questions

Round One

1. What does the term "permanency planning" mean to you?
2. What has your involvement in permanency planning been?
3. What does the term "the best interest of the child" mean to you?
4. Do you think that there is a difference in commitment level to a child between foster care, guardianship and adoption? Why or why not?
5. Do you think a child would perceive a difference in their sense of belonging to a family based on the above?
6. What are your feelings about separating a child from the birth parent? Physically? Legally?
7. What are your experiences or familiarity with adoption and/or foster care?
8. How important do you think it is for children to "belong" to a family - birth or otherwise?

Round Two

9. Tell me about your feelings and experiences and opinions about "the system" and how it works and any conflicts you have experienced.
10. Our data has shown that this process can be improved to determine the best interest of the child. How do you think this could happen?
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