Early identification of paternal family members as permanency resources for children in foster care are frequently untapped by social workers who work with families. The field of children, youth, and family services has had a long history of not including fathers in planning for children and youth. For decades we have listed “father unknown” on our forms; or have not even thought about inquiring as to a child’s father’s whereabouts in the case assessment because the assumption was that fathers were uninvolved in the lives of their children. If a child’s father was uninvolved, we surmised, then the father’s family was most likely uninvolved as well. In many cases, nothing could be further from the truth as many mothers not only know about their child’s father, but also know about and rely on his family for support as well.

Not asking about, or assuming uninvolvement, or accepting “I don’t know where my child’s father’s family live” are all examples of inadequate approaches to seeking out fathers in the lives of children in foster care – and not just father’s, but “their families” too. Paternal aunts, uncles, grandparents, great-grandparents, and cousins are all part of the paternal web of resources that may exist for a child in need of permanency and may also remain untapped as resources because of our acceptance of the “I don’t know” answer.

Children in the child welfare system have not been immune to the trends in father absence. There is evidence that the majority of children in the system have non-custodial fathers, although the exact proportion is unclear. Further, some of the recent shifts in child welfare policy have had ramifications for how non-custodial fathers are involved in case planning.

According to a recent report issued by the Urban Institute focusing on Study of Fathers’ Involvement in Permanency Planning and Child Welfare Casework (Sonenstein, Malm, & Billing, 2002), there is evidence that some child welfare agencies, in conjunction with child support enforcement programs, are working diligently to identify and locate non-custodial fathers. What follows is a detailed summary of the policies and practices, which affect the involvement of non-custodial fathers as, identified in their August, 2002 report.
What child welfare policies and practices affect the involvement of non-custodial fathers?

There are a number of shifts in child welfare policies and practices that could make the involvement of non-custodial fathers in child welfare case planning more likely. These include the provisions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997, the nationwide movement of the field towards concurrent case planning, the increasing use of kinship placements and the growing popularity of family decision-making in case planning. Each of these trends and their potential for increasing the role of non-custodial fathers in case planning is described below. However, no research was identified that examines whether these practices actually increase the involvement of non-custodial fathers.

ASFA requires the reduction of the time in which child welfare agencies must make permanency decisions for children in custody from 18 months to 12 months, making the early identification and location of non-custodial fathers more important. In addition, ASFA both allowed and encouraged states to use the Federal Parent Locator Service (FPLS) employed by child support enforcement programs to locate fathers and other relatives. Child welfare agencies routinely identify and assess non-custodial parents as potential placement resources, and some states’ policies explicitly give preference to them. California’s policy, for example, states that “the first placement priority is for placement in the home of the non-custodial parent, or in the home of a suitable relative (if a non-custodial parent is unavailable).” Other states’ policies are more general, such as the policy in Texas that requires the agency to ensure that parents are unable or unwilling to provide care prior to placing a child in out-of-home care. Michigan’s policy manual states that while “return home” is usually the most appropriate goal when a child is first placed in foster care, where indicated, the focus may shift to the non-custodial parent’s home.

Agencies must identify non-custodial parents as early as possible so that termination of their rights, when needed, can occur swiftly. The 2000 Adoption and Permanency Guidelines from the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, state that, “At the very first hearing on a petition alleging abuse or neglect, efforts should begin to include all parents involved in the life of the child and to locate absent parents.” The guidelines go on to discuss the importance of putative fathers being located and brought into court early both to resolve paternity issues but also to avoid court delays later in the process (Grossmann, Funk, Mentaberry, & Seibel, 2000). While judicial guidelines have long sought this early identification, the implementation of ASFA has increased the likelihood that this is occurring more consistently. In addition to identifying and locating non-custodial fathers for the express purpose of accelerating the termination of parental rights, finding these fathers is important to the adoption proceedings so that the paternal side of the child’s background and medical history can be obtained prior to adoption. Finally, the resolution of such paternity issues may also be instrumental in locating and securing other paternal relatives that may be utilized in permanency planning.

Another practice within child welfare agencies, increasing nationwide, is the use of concurrent planning. This practice encourages caseworkers to pursue more than one goal for the child.

From the beginning of the case process, caseworkers can simultaneously attempt to locate a permanent or adoptive home for a child while they seek to preserve or reunite the child with his/her family. Efforts to locate non-custodial fathers may occur much earlier when child welfare agencies support concurrent planning because fathers or their relatives may be a placement resource. Moreover, fathers need to be identified and located to obtain termination of parental rights if the adoption option is pursued.

Two other trends in child welfare practice, the increasing use of kinship placements and the use of family decision-making models, may affect the ways in which caseworkers identify, locate, and involve non-custodial fathers. The use of relatives or “kin” as foster parents increased significantly in the 1980s and early 1990s. One of the main factors contributing to the use of kinship care is that child welfare agencies have developed a more positive attitude toward the use of kin as foster parents. In addition, the number of non-kin foster parents has not kept pace with the number of children requiring out of home care. The increased use of kinship care may also reflect recent court decisions upholding the rights of relatives to act as foster parents and to be financially compensated for doing so. Policies and practices geared toward identifying and locating relatives as potential placements may lead workers to identify and locate non-custodial parents. Not only have agency policies shifted in favor of placement with relatives, but also the focus is on finding these relatives early in the process, prior to having to place the child in a non-kin foster home.
The increased use of kinship care within child welfare can also hasten the involvement of the non-custodial father to the extent that financial support is sought. Relatives who receive a TANF payment or foster care payment on behalf of a related child are required to cooperate with child support enforcement. States are increasingly seeking reimbursement for the cost of care of foster children through child support enforcement efforts. A significant proportion of children in foster care are eligible for federal IV-E reimbursement funds to the state. Also, child welfare agencies are increasingly requiring parents to repay the cost of out-of-home placement for children ineligible for IV-E reimbursement. Relatives participating in recent focus groups on kinship care giving, conducted by the Urban Institute, noted that their offspring were upset at being required to repay the monthly foster care payment that was being provided to the relative caregiver.

Increasingly, child welfare agencies are also utilizing family group conferencing or family meetings. These techniques seek to include a range of individuals — all immediate and extended family members, child welfare staff, and community provider staff — in the case process. Through the family meetings, agency staff are able to inform family members of the case particulars, the case process, agency and court procedures, as well as to solicit their input on case planning, identification of potential placement options, and permanency outcomes. During the organization and facilitation of these family meetings, agency workers are likely to obtain extensive information about the non-custodial father from other family members. Thus, agencies using this form of casework practice are probably in a better position to identify, locate and involve non-custodial fathers in case planning.

**What promising practices are currently being implemented to identify, locate, and involve non-custodial fathers in child welfare cases?**

The 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act both allowed and encouraged states to begin to use the Federal Parent Locator Service (FPLS) to locate fathers and other relatives. ASFA authorized child welfare and child support enforcement agencies to request information from the FPLS to locate individuals who have or may have parental rights to a child. Interagency agreements between the agencies were also encouraged. An informational memorandum sent January 1, 1999 to state agencies administering or supervising the administration of Title IV-D and Title IV-E of the Social Security Act provided information on using the FPLS for child welfare services. In addition, the 1993 federally-mandated Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information Systems (SACWIS) being implemented by states child welfare agencies required a link to child support data.

Efforts to coordinate child welfare and child support services, notes the Urban Institute, may offer promise. Results from an evaluation of South Carolina’s Department of Social Services’ diligent search project showed that missing parents were located in over 75 percent of the cases referred by child welfare staff, and more than half of these cases were located in less than a month. Fathers were far more likely to be the subject of the search than mothers, representing 72 percent of the total referrals. The results also showed that in 15 percent of families there were referrals to locate more than one father. This occurred both in cases involving undetermined paternity as well as families in which multiple children had different fathers. It is important to note that 10 percent of fathers were found through the prison, probation, or parole systems.

There is also some evidence, the report notes, of increased state level coordination between child welfare and child support agencies in a handful of states. Interviews being conducted with child welfare administrators in all 50 states by the Urban Institute have identified a few states with increased coordination. In Kansas, for example, the child support enforcement and child welfare agencies are both emphasizing the involvement of fathers, although no joint activities are currently being undertaken. In addition, Wisconsin’s child support agency has hired paternity specialists who are available to child welfare workers to assist in identifying and locating non-custodial fathers (Bess, Andrews, Jantz, & Russell, forthcoming).

During the Urban Institute’s study of kinship care, some agencies reported that, with the increased focus on kinship care placements, specialized units have been created specifically to search for relatives, including non-custodial fathers. In other agencies, no special unit was created, yet individual caseworkers had access to the welfare agency’s data system to help locate non-custodial fathers and other relatives. It is important to note, however, that very few of the local child welfare administrators interviewed had implemented the Federal Parent Locator System to locate non-custodial fathers. In fact, some administrators were unaware that this resource could be utilized by the child welfare system.
Other examples of promising new approaches are communities receiving Model Court project grants from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (Mentaberry, 1999). Some of these communities are implementing innovative approaches to expediting permanency for children, including projects that focus on paternity establishment and locating absent parents as primary goals. Responsible fatherhood programs and programs for incarcerated parents also provide examples of some potentially promising practices.

Programs focused on prisoners, such as “Long Distance Dads” implemented by the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, address the needs of incarcerated fathers. This program is a 12-week program designed to promote fatherhood and empower fathers to assume responsibility for their children both during and after incarceration. Other promising models include the F.A.C.T. Program in Kentucky, a collaborative effort between Prevent Child Abuse Kentucky and the Blackburn Correctional Complex. This program teaches fathers who are incarcerated responsible parenthood and abuse prevention, with graduates of the program entitled to special visits with their children in less restrictive environments.

Another program entitled Papas and Their Children (PATCH) has been developed in San Antonio, Texas. This is a weekly program facilitating participatory activities between children and their incarcerated fathers at several State jails.

The Urban Institute’s preliminary review of responsible fatherhood programs, found two programs with components that may address child abuse and neglect. A fatherhood program in Hawaii is providing parenting skills for fathers in families identified as at risk for child abuse and neglect. The participating fathers are being served by a Healthy Start child abuse prevention program.

In Chicago, Illinois, the Paternal Involvement Project has been a strong advocate for fathers since 1992 and was instrumental in drafting legislation that created the state’s first Non-custodial Parent Services Unit. The group is currently participating in a pilot project with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services in an effort to promote non-custodial fathers as custodial alternatives to mothers who are unable to care for children (Jeffries, Menghrjj, & Hairston, 2001).

The Urban Institutes’ review uncovered a few examples of promising new efforts to involve non-custodial fathers in child welfare case planning. However, as indicated, these efforts are fairly limited, and no rigorous evaluations have been conducted yet to assess whether the efforts lead to positive effects for the case outcomes.

Promoting Responsible Fatherhood
An HHS Fact Sheet

Studies show that children who grow up without responsible fathers are significantly more likely to experience poverty, perform poorly in school, engage in criminal activity, and abuse drugs and alcohol. The Department of Health and Human Services supports programs and policies that reflect the critical role that both fathers and mothers play in building strong and successful families and in the well-being of children. To get a copy of this fact sheet, please call 202/690-6343 or visit www.hhs.gov/news/press/2002pres/fathers

DHHS’s Fatherhood Initiative Web Site
The Department of Health and Human Services has developed a special initiative to support and strengthen the roles of fathers in families. This initiative is guided by the following principles:

- All fathers can be important contributors to the well-being of their children
- Parents are partners in raising their children, even when they do not live in the same household
- The roles fathers play in families are diverse and related to cultural and community norms
- Men should receive the education and support necessary to prepare them for the responsibility of parenthood
- Government can encourage and promote father involvement through its programs and through its own workforce policies

www.fatherhood.hhs.gov

Nurturing Fatherhood
Improving Data and Research on Male Fertility, Family Formation, and Fatherhood
(June, 1998): Published by the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics

The purpose of this volume is to share with federal statistical agencies, federal and state policy-makers and the broad family and child well-being research community the results of a multi-year process to review and analyze the state of data collection and research on male fertility, family formation, and fathering.

http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/CFSForum/front
Conclusions

It seems clear that the recent trends putting more emphasis on the involvement of non-custodial fathers in their children’s lives is likely to affect the families served by child welfare agencies. While the nature of recent policy reforms and program initiatives like expedited permanency planning, concurrent planning, and family group meetings, may lead us to believe that child welfare agencies will increasingly identify, locate, and involve non-custodial fathers in casework and permanency planning, the current lack of research means that there is no empirical evidence to predict the likely effects of these shifts in case practice.

There are some limited efforts to promote collaborations between child welfare and child support enforcement agencies. The results of the South Carolina diligent search project appear promising. The focus of this effort thus far appears to be on identifying and locating fathers primarily for the purposes of expediting the termination of parental rights, thereby hastening adoption proceedings. Other collaborative efforts are focused on increasing child support collections. Few programs, with the exception of the parental involvement project in Illinois, focus attention on finding non-custodial fathers as placement resources.

The lack of basic research about how non-custodial fathers are involved in the child welfare permanency planning process provides a strong rationale for the current study conducted by the Urban Institute, which will examine case work practices in five states. For these five states, the study will provide information that is currently not available about:

- How many children in foster care have non-custodial fathers?
- How do child welfare policies and caseworker practices currently involve non-custodial fathers in case planning?
- What are the perceived barriers to involving non-custodial fathers in case planning?
- What are the perceived likely effects of non-custodial father involvement?
- How many children in foster care are known to the child support program and can child support locator services assist child welfare agencies in identifying and locating non-custodial fathers?
- What promising practices are currently being implemented to identify, locate, and involve non-custodial fathers in child welfare cases?

References:


For additional information on Fatherhood issues check these web sites:

The Urban Institute’s report on Fathers’ Involvement in Permanency Planning and Child Welfare Casework is available on the Internet at: http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/CW-dads02/

The NRCFCPP has a wide variety of information on Fatherhood initiatives, as well as our own Information Pack on Fatherhood available on the Internet at: www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/fatherhood.html

The National Child Welfare Resource Center on Family-Centered Practice has a full issue of their newsletter dedicated to Fatherhood, available on the Internet at:

Online%20publications/fatherInvolvement.pdf
Visiting between children in care and their families is one of the areas in which the National Resource Center for Foster Care & Permanency Planning (NRCFCPP) provides technical assistance, training, and information services to the states in response to the Child and Family Services Review process. To facilitate the provision of these services, the Resource Center contracted for a study of the states’ current policies and procedures regarding visiting between children in care, family members, and others significant in the child’s life. Foster care managers in all states were contacted. To date, responses have been received from 74% (37) of the states. Thirty-four foster care managers or their designees completed a telephone survey regarding the nature of their state’s policies, and a copy of the state’s policy and procedures has been received from all but five of the 37 states.

The preliminary analysis of the states’ policies regarding visiting between children in care and their families indicates a wide range of requirements. Some states’ policies are brief, providing limited guidance to agency staff, foster parents, families of children in care, and others. Other states provide extensive guidance regarding visits, discussing a range of issues related to the planning of visits, implementation, and evaluation. Through its web site, newsletter, information packs and other mechanisms, in the coming months the NRCFCPP will provide detailed information regarding the study findings and examples of the responding states’ policies.

This article identifies the categories, or content areas, that the states responding currently address in their policies and procedures. A number of states address the majority of these; however, some states address very few. The content areas identified may serve as a checklist for use in the review of state, county, or agency visiting policy and procedures. Most are illustrated with a brief excerpt from a state’s current policy. The excerpts are not to be construed as exemplars, but rather as examples.

**Purposes of visits:**

“It is a fundamental right for children to visit with their parents. The relationship developed by the child with the parent is one of bonding, dependency, and being nurtured, all of which must be protected for the emotional well-being of the child. It is of extreme importance for a child not to feel abandoned in placement by either the child’s parents or by other siblings, and for a child to be reassured that no harm has befallen either parent or siblings when separation occurs. Visitation for a child is an opportunity for reconnecting, and reestablishing the parent/child relationship. For the Division, visitation is to be a time for assessing that relationship. For parents, visitation is an excellent time to learn and practice new concepts of parenting and to assess their own ability to parent . . . Above all, visitation provides the necessary element for return of the child to the parent home. It maintains the parent-child relationship. Without this relationship, there can be no successful return home . . .” (Indiana)

**How soon after placement parents & children should visit:**

“Within three working days of placement, the following should be done: unless contrary to the welfare of the child, arranges at least one [caseworker] visit with the child and one visit between the child and parents, siblings, or other significant adults to be held during the first week of placement...” (South Carolina)

**How soon after the child’s placement a plan for visiting must be developed:**

“... Department policy requires that a visitation plan be developed, with parental and child’s input, either: before placement, or within three (3) days after a planned placement, or within ten (10) days after an emergency placement.” (Illinois)

**What the visit plan should include:**

“The visitation plan will address but is not limited to such issues as:
1. Dates, times and location of visits
2. How arrangements will be made
3. Who will be present
4. Arrangements for monitoring or supervision, if any
5. Plan for handling of emergency situations
6. Procedures for handling problems with visitation
(This must include a requirement that the worker shall respond to the family or foster care provider.) (Nebraska)
How frequently parents & children should have visits:
“Daily visits with the parent(s) and other family members(s) will be encouraged. At a minimum, the team will encourage weekly visits with the parent(s) if the permanency goal is for the child to return home…” (Alabama)

Who may participate in visits:
“The assessment should identify parents, grandparents, siblings, and other relatives or adults in a surrogate parental role with whom the child has an established and significant relationship to the extent that loss of the relationship would cause substantial harm to the child and the preservation of the relationship would otherwise be in the best interest of the child.” (Louisiana)

Where visits should or may occur:
“Visits may be held in the home of the parents, relatives, or foster family when feasible. When this is not feasible, neutral sites such as parks or shopping malls may be selected. . . Any visits held in the [agency] offices shall receive prior approval of the district manager unless the office was requested by the family or suggested by the court…” (Kentucky)

The times (days of the week or time of day) during which visits may be scheduled:
“In developing a child-family contact plan consideration shall be given to: . . . the child’s school schedule; . . . the parent(s’) work and treatment obligations;” (Oregon)

The duration of visits:
“Initial visits of short duration, one to two hours, allow parents to experience small successes. . . Successful unsupervised day long, overnight and weekend visits are completed prior to planning for the return home.” (Oklahoma)

Visit activities:
“Ideally, visits should involve parents in routine activities of parenting, such as attending his/her child’s school functions, special occasions and medical check-ups, as well as engaging in feeding, diapering, and other direct child care responsibilities.” (Georgia)

Supervision of visits (whether supervised and by whom):
“The parent or other visitors and the Division representative, Case Manager, shall discuss the need for supervised visits at the time the visitation plan is negotiated or renegotiated. Unless the Division or the Family Court finds a need for supervision, visits shall be unsupervised. If visits will be supervised, the plan shall contain a statement of the reason supervision is required. Reasons for the supervision of visits may include: Facilitating interactions between the parent and the foster child; Modeling positive parenting behavior; Mediating conflict between the parent and the foster child; and Providing protection for the foster child.” (New Jersey)

Parental responsibilities regarding visits:
“In all visitation situations there are certain responsibilities for which a parent should be held accountable. These include: Ensuring the emotional and physical safety and well-being of his or her child; Providing his own transportation whenever possible; and Calling as far in advance as possible to cancel visits so a child may be less likely to feel rejection and disappointment from a no-show visit; Planning an activity to participate in with the child during the visits; Taking the parental role during interactions with his or her child; Expect and respond to direction from the visit supervisor when the visits are supervised; Follow the pre-established guidelines and rules for visitation.” (Maine)

Foster Parent responsibilities regarding visits:
“The foster/adoptive family agrees, for each placed in her/his home, to permit and support visits between the child and the child’s parents and/or siblings as recommended by the Department, both within and outside the foster/adoptive family home.” (Massachusetts)

The use of visits as a Reward or Punishment:
“Withholding of visits shall never be used as a threat or form of discipline to the child or to control or punish the parent for failure to work with the agency or other community providers.” (Ohio)

Circumstances under which visits may be limited or terminated:
Except as otherwise authorized herein, parental visitation shall not be terminated or limited by a social services official having care and custody of the child, or by another authorized agency acting on his behalf, except by court order in a proceeding in which the parent or guardian was a party. Visitation is to continue until such a court order is obtained, except in cases of imminent danger to the child’s life, health and safety. In cases of imminent danger to the child’s life, health and safety, the authorized agency may terminate or limit visitation. Subdivisions of this section do not apply if the parent or guardian agrees in writing to the termination or limitation of visiting.” (New York)
Additional content areas for which examples are too lengthy to include are:

- Social worker (caseworker, case manager, etc.) responsibilities regarding visits
- Agency services which should be provided to support visits
- Requirements regarding documentation of visiting
- Procedures to be followed when changes are made in visit plans
- Appeal process for parents who disagreed with visit plan or changes in plan
- Sanctions or consequences when parents do maintain visits as planned

The responding states’ policies/procedures are also being analyzed for guidelines regarding situations in which a parent is incarcerated or in a treatment or institutional setting; when sexual abuse or domestic violence has been alleged or determined; and during the periods during court review of and following termination of parental rights, including following adoption. In addition, information collected from the states’ foster care managers regarding innovative visiting programs will be expanded and disseminated.

An Information Pack to assist practitioners and policy-makers interested in finding out more about Family/Child Visiting can be downloaded for free on the NRCFCPP’s website at www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp

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Family to Family Program

The United States child welfare system faces serious challenges that have been growing for more than a decade. In response, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, in consultation with community leaders and child welfare practitioners nationwide, has developed a reform initiative called Family to Family. For more information, please visit http://www.aecf.org/initiatives/familytofamily

L.I.N.K. (Linking Information Networks for Kids) Families:

NYS Citizens Coalition and the Salvation Army have partnered to create this program in the Syracuse region which uses experienced foster parents to mentor new foster parents and, among other things, help them foster child-focused relationships between with birth families and agencies. For more information, please visit http://www.nysccc.org/linkfamily/linkmain
Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care:
A National Collaboration

by Elisabeth Yu
Child Welfare League of America

In today’s technological society, earning a high school degree—and beyond—is a prerequisite for self-sufficiency and independent living. Education increases one’s prospects of earning a living wage that can meet basic material and physical needs such as food, clothing, adequate and safe housing, and primary and preventive health care. For youth who are transitioning from the child welfare system, education is their best hope of becoming truly independent adults. [i]

Educational Experiences of Youth in Care

The link between placement in out-of-home care and low academic performance has been documented. Studies found a range of 26% to 40% of youth in care repeated one or more grades. [ii][iii] In addition, 30% to 96% of students in care were below grade level in reading or math. [iv][v] Some studies cite 37% to 80% of youth had not completed their high school education even after they exited care. [vi][vii][viii][ix][x] Children and youth in care who are receiving special education services range from 30% to 41% although the number of children in care receiving special education services may be underreported. [x][xi][xii][xiii][xiv]

Placement instability also affects educational success. Changes in foster care placement often cause changes in school placement for youth in care. School performance suffers as youth experience school disruption. As a result of placement disruptions, students in care are less likely to receive timely assessments, obtain continuous educational services, and have accurate and current school records.

A National Collaboration

One factor that hampers the educational progress of youth in care is the lack of collaboration between child welfare agencies, schools, and the courts. The education of youth in care is affected when the three systems do not systematically share information or plan in a coordinated way. Child welfare workers may not have the health and education records needed to enroll students in school. The school itself can resist or delay a student’s enrollment or fail to recognize the existence of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Additionally, judges may not routinely inquire about a youth’s school progress unless educational difficulties come to their attention. Recognizing the need for collaboration between these systems, the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and the Permanency Planning for Children Department of the National Council of Juvenile & Family Court Judges (PPCD) launched a collaborative project in 2001, in consultation with Casey Family Programs and with support from the Margaretse Casey Foundation. The Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care project aimed to increase the capacity of child welfare professionals, judges, and educators to help young people meet their educational and transition goals and to increase judicial understanding of the Chafee Foster Care Independence Programs.

Recommendations

As part of this collaborative project, a national symposium of child welfare, educational, and judicial experts was convened in February 2002. The symposium provided a unique opportunity to assemble professionals from child welfare, the judiciary, and education to build consensus, draw national attention, and bring a shared commitment to supporting the educational progress of young people in care. Symposium participants made the following recommendations for improving the educational attainment of youth in care [xv]:

- Child welfare, education, and the judiciary should make the well-being of youth in care a clear priority. They should encourage youth in care to succeed, obtain post-secondary education, and participate in developing their case plans. All disciplines working with youth should adhere to the philosophy and practice the principles of positive youth development.

- Systems should collaborate to improve educational outcomes for youth in care by sharing records, memoranda of understanding, and court orders. Cross-agency partnerships should be developed by engaging leaders and stakeholders from other systems and by forming joint committees.

- The education, judicial, and child welfare fields should fulfill their respective responsibilities in ensuring the educational progress of youth in care.

- The educational system should facilitate records transfers, provide timely educational assessments, use all school personnel to encourage youth, and include other systems in school settings.

- The judicial system should assume responsibility for overseeing the educational progress of children in care throughout the life of the case, form a Model Court advisory committee, produce a bench book for judges, and try to maintain the youth in the same school throughout his or her case. Judges should meet regularly with decision-makers on state and local boards of education.

- The child welfare system should involve families in service delivery; maintain stability in children’s lives, and provide courts with accurate educational information. Agencies should reduce case loads and plan for the transition to independence for all youth. The child welfare system should also develop a database of health and education records for children in care.
Training between and across disciplines should be developed and widely implemented to improve the capacity of the systems to meet the educational needs of youth in care, including information on laws such as the Foster Care Independence Act.

Advocacy for youth in care should raise awareness about their educational rights and needs. Educational advocacy positions should be created and legislation that supports higher educational attainment for youth should be promoted. Also, a public awareness campaign that increases community awareness of youth in care should be implemented.

A comprehensive approach including resources, tools, and strategies for change should be developed. This includes allocating resources and staff to collaborate with other systems, compiling information on promising practices and programs, and recruiting community volunteers for tutoring.

The overarching theme that emerged from the Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care project was the need to make the education of youth in care a national priority. This project was an initial effort at addressing an issue that will increasingly impact youth, families, and our country as a whole. Much more needs to be done in this area. Because youth in care are limited in voicing their needs as a collective group, the child welfare, judicial, and education systems must work together to ensure the best possible outcomes for youth in care. All youth in care should have the opportunity and support to realize their potential, have hope for their future, and see their dreams become a reality.


“I relaxed,” said one foster child when asked what he did after finding out that he was to be placed for adoption with his older brothers. Yes, sibling interaction is often spiced with conflict. Yet, competition between siblings can be intense. But through the years, no bond is typically longer, stronger, or more comforting than that between siblings—especially those who are separated from other birth family members through foster care or adoption. Fortunately, child welfare professionals and legislators are becoming increasingly sensitive to sibling issues and are finding ways to help keep siblings together and connected.

Background
It seems so obvious that child welfare professionals should work to keep siblings connected. They belong together, as many initiatives to support efforts to reunite sibling groups and recruit families for siblings can attest.

For children who enter foster care, separation from birth parents is traumatic, and separation from siblings who share a common history is a devastating, ultimately isolating loss. As an adoptive mother of three siblings wrote in a letter:

My children had nothing left but each other...[and] had formed a tremendous bond with each other. This bond was a great deal closer than most kids because they needed each other to survive. ...My children have an appreciation of each other most siblings don’t form until later in life. They have learned to love and trust each other. They accept their differences. They celebrate in each other’s victories. Taking away the only people they trust is devastating and does nothing more than increase their distrust of everyone else.

Separated siblings are robbed of future family connections as well; they may never know their nieces and nephews, and their children will miss out on knowing aunts and uncles. Regina Kupecky, a therapist at the Attachment and Bonding Center of Ohio and co-author of Adopting the Hurt Child, adds that separated siblings lose pieces of themselves when they lose touch, and consequently have a harder time building an identity. A sibling who is adopted when his or her brothers and sisters remain in foster care may also experience guilt—a feeling that he or she has abandoned the other siblings—compounded with a sense of having been abandoned by his or her birth parents. Separated siblings’ experience loss piled on loss.

Recent and poignant poster from the Dave Thomas Foundation shows two siblings together—the caption reads “We were told that our chances of getting adopted would be greater if we were separated— we think we’ll take our chances.”

But why are siblings separated in the first place? Once separated in foster care, children are much less likely to be placed together in an adoptive placement. In addition, as outlined in Adopting the Hurt Child, workers may be unaware that foster children have siblings (though statistics suggest that 65 to 85 percent of children who enter foster care have at least one sibling), or may assume that adoptive families want or can handle only one child. Other workers may presume—often erroneously—that children who abuse their siblings or act as a parent to their siblings should be placed separately either for their siblings’ or their own good.

Keeping Siblings Together
Since the 1980s, researchers have focused increasing attention on the importance of sibling ties. Siblings who are placed together have been known to transition more smoothly into new homes, and most researchers agree that attachments between siblings are critically important. In recent years, many states have taken action to help siblings stay together.

Below are some suggestions
of what states and workers are doing to keep brothers and sisters from being separated.

1. LEGISLATION, POLICY & SPECIAL PROGRAMS
At least 26 states address the sibling relationship in legislation concerned with foster care, permanency planning, and/or adoption.

2. MIND SET
In some states, the program director reviews every request to separate siblings in adoptive placements. Working in consultation with other experts, directors approve splits only when faced with extenuating circumstances. Siblings can be placed together in adoptive homes. Though siblings may be separated in foster care (due to the finite number of foster homes and beds), workers and administrators should never underestimate adoptive families’ willingness to preserve sibling ties and assume care for multiple children.

3. MARKETING
To recruit and retain resource families for siblings, agencies need to let families know that groups are available. Whenever possible, photos used for recruiting purposes—in newspaper features, in photo listings, on the Internet—should include all of the available siblings in the same shot. Accompanying descriptions should state that the siblings must be placed together, and suggest how the siblings interact with and care about one another. On the AdoptUSkids Internet photo listing (www.adoptUSkids.org), each sibling’s profile page contains a list of other siblings with links to their pages, as well as a starred statement that the siblings are being placed as a group.

ADAPTED FROM SPRING 1999 ADOPTALK
by Diane Riggs
4. TRACKING AND FOLLOW-UP.
Because siblings may come into care and become available for adoption at different times, agencies who wish to preserve sibling ties must find ways to track the location and status of brothers and sisters. As many workers know, the family who adopts one sibling is often more than willing to adopt others who subsequently become available.

5. FINANCIAL INCENTIVES.
Some adoption agencies have also realized the economic benefits of recruiting families who will adopt more than one child. The cost—in time and money—that an agency must expend to find one family for three children, for example, may be much less than the cost of finding three separate families. Families who adopt sibling groups (and who were planning to adopt more than one child) may save themselves the financial and emotional strain of going through the adoption process multiple times.

Keeping Siblings Connected

Even in the best-intentioned agencies, siblings will be placed apart from one another. They may enter foster care at different times, may be part of a group so large that a single foster or adoptive home cannot be found, or may have such intense needs that a single home cannot adequately meet every child’s needs.

Separation does not, however, have to mean disconnection. When children are placed apart, states can mandate visitation, workers can facilitate meetings between siblings, and foster and adoptive parents can strive to see that their children stay in touch with brothers and sisters. If sibling contact is severely compromising a child’s health or safety, it is sometimes necessary to suspend interaction, but in most cases siblings need, want, and benefit from regular contact.

Some Ways to Help Keep Siblings Connected

1. LEGISLATION & POLICY
The issues covered by various state laws fall into several general categories, which can roughly be identified as the following:
- Right to or provision for maintaining contact
- Sibling relationship considered in determining “best interest”
- Requires the child welfare agency to prepare a description of efforts made to keep siblings together and/or provide reasons siblings are not placed together
- Provisions for post-permanency visits with siblings
- Requires the child welfare agency and/or court to consider siblings in placement and/or permanency planning
- Provides for an exemption from limits on the size of a foster home if placement of a sibling group
- Placement and/or visits to be considered at periodic reviews
- Statement of legislative intent to support sibling relationships

2. OLD-FASHIONED TECHNOLOGY
- Phone calls and letters are still among the most common methods of communicating. Both can bridge great distances, and letters can also include pictures or other mementos to help siblings feel connected.

3. NEW-FASHIONED TECHNOLOGY
For children who would rather spend time with a computer than a paper and pencil, e-mail is another good way of staying in touch. Online messages can also include pictures and other attachments. Videoconferencing—a way for people at remote locations to see and hear each other on television monitors—is another option. Videoconference rooms are available at many Kinko’s copy center locations, and on weekends the cost is just $75 an hour per site. For siblings who are placed with two different families states apart, a half-hour videoconference on a weekend would cost each family just $37.50.

4. RESPIRE CARE
When children are in different homes in the same community, foster or adoptive parents could arrange for siblings to spend time together with the same respite care provider. The parent of one sibling could also volunteer to provide respite services for the parent of another sibling.

5. THERAPY
Regina Kupecky, noted Sibling Ties expert, suggests that separated siblings may benefit from sharing a therapist as well. Often, she explains, siblings can help each other fill in pieces of their past history—pieces that may help the therapist find more effective ways to treat each child.

6. SPECIAL EVENTS
When possible, face-to-face contact between siblings is best, and siblings may feel less awkward about reunions if they meet as part of a larger event. For instance, each of the siblings’ families could meet at a park for a day of picnicking and playing. Families could also plan group outings to amusement parks or zoos, or other places where siblings and their families can interact and have fun. Families could even investigate the possibility of sending the siblings to a summer camp together.
7. PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT
Kupecky stresses that parents have to be directive and supportive of children’s efforts to stay connected with their siblings. It is not easy to ask parents to both integrate a new child into their family, and help the child maintain contact with birth family members. Children may also feel torn between remaining loyal to their birth family and trying to fit in with their adoptive family. If siblings are to stay connected, parents must help organize activities and provide the nuts and bolts needs (transportation, money, phone access, etc.) that enable contact.

Concluding Thoughts
Kathy and Jim Schmidt were parents to two children in a foster care placement when they learned that their foster daughter Tammy’s younger sister was available for adoption. Because they were committed to keeping the siblings together, they agreed to adopt Jenny. The Schmidt’s have also helped Tammy and Jenny stay in touch with two older sisters who have been placed in long-term foster care. Though Tammy thinks Jenny is a pest, and Kathy sometimes finds it emotionally and logistically challenging to keep her children connected with their older siblings, the effort is paying off.

“Knowing her birth siblings,” says Kathy, “has helped to make Tammy whole. Many children who are in foster care have holes—they are like a sieve—from lost connections with their birth family members, from abuse, from missing out on nurturing. I can provide the love and nurturing, but I can’t plug the other holes in the sieve unless I can help these children take ownership of their histories. Tammy’s and Jen’s connection with each other and with their siblings gives them a core sense of who they are and where they come from. With that knowledge and sense of belonging, they can move more confidently into the future.”

Bottom line, the best way to keep siblings connected is to keep them together. From the time children enter care, workers and courts should strive to place siblings in the same foster home, and hold fast to the goal of keeping children in the same placement until they can be reunited with birth families or placed in the same adoptive home. Children who are placed in foster care have already endured terrible losses; parents, workers, administrators, and legislators should make sure that foster and adopted children do not lose the brothers and sisters who can help make them feel more whole.

Camp To Belong
Camp To Belong is a non-profit organization dedicated to reuniting brothers and sisters placed in separate foster homes or other out-of-home care for events of fun, emotional empowerment and sibling connection. Our flagship events include week-long summer camps throughout the country inviting brothers and sisters to share quality time together and with others who can relate to their situations. Signature events focusing on the sibling connection and inspirational success for the future are weaved through life-time memories. Year round, Camp To Belong actively participates in mentoring, reunions, research, advocacy, policy-making and speaking engagements with a goal to Give Siblings Their Right To Reunite. Camp To Belong, 9445 S. Sand Hill Place, Highlands Ranch, CO 80126, office-303-791-0915, fax-303-791-0916, toll-free-888-723-5664, website- www.camp-tobelong.org, and e-mail info@camptobelong.org

For More Information about Sibling Issues:
An Information Pack to assist practitioners and policy-makers interested in finding out more about Sibling Issues can be downloaded for free on the NRCFCPP’s website at: www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/information_packets/siblings-pkt.pdf
Casey Family Programs, also have many resources available to assist practitioners and resource families committed to keeping siblings together at their website www.Casey.org

Agencies Needed to Test Family Assessment Tools
For years, child welfare agencies have faced a growing need for standardized and reliable assessment tools to judge family foster care applicants’ potential success. Now a multi-disciplinary team from the University of Tennessee is collaborating with Casey Family Programs to develop and test two such tools: the Casey Home Assessment Protocol (CHAP) and the Casey Foster Applicant Inventory (CFAI).

Agencies are needed to help pilot test the CFAI.
Foster mothers are needed to help pilot test the CHAP.
Those interested should contact Nicole Le Prohn (nleprohn@casey.org, 206/270-4925) or John Orme (jorme@utk.edu, 865/974-7503).
To learn more about the project and the new family assessment tools, please visit www.casey.org/research/ffa/index.htm.
**Newsletter Winter 2003**

**Book Review**

**Books**

**Turning Stones: My Days and Nights with Children at Risk**
1998 by Marc Parent

Parent was an Emergency Children’s Service worker in New York City’s child welfare system, and men and women who on nights and weekends investigate calls about children in danger. Parent came to public prominence when a baby died after he and another worker visited a family in a mice- and drug-infested building and missed identifying the child as at imminent risk, of death or serious injury. Parent agonized over the judgment for weeks. It includes what the author considers the most tragic and dramatic of the hundreds of cases he encountered.

**Wasted: The Plight of America’s Unwanted Children**
1997 by Patrick T. Murphy

Murphy believes that state agencies and the legal system don’t always use good judgment when trying to keep families together. He readily admits that even marginally conscientious parents are usually better than the institutional care the state can provide, but claims to have seen many cases of children brutalized by parents who lack skills and concern. He lists practical ideas for rehabilitating the system, such as reclassifying abuse and neglect into three separate categories for legal redress, and restructuring child welfare bureaucracies into two agencies, one to provide services and the other to investigate child abuse.

**Evaluating Practice: Guidelines for the Accountable Professional**
Bloom et al

This text/CD-ROM package covers qualitative and quantitative approaches to evaluation. It includes conceptualizing and measuring targets and objectives, evaluating designs, analyzing results, and single-system designs. This fourth edition contains integrated material on managed care responses, group evaluation, and primary prevention, and highlights newer forms of practice, including micro practice. The CD-ROM contains a software package designed to help practitioners assess the effectiveness of interventions using visual and statistical analysis.

**Achieving Permanence for Every Child: A Guide for Limiting the Use of Long-Term Foster Care as a Permanent Plan**
1997, by Kate Welty, M.A.

This guide presents child welfare system barriers that result in the overuse of long-term foster care as a permanent plan, and identifies ways to overcome these barriers. A self-assessment tool encourages practitioners to look critically at their systems and challenge themselves to explore alternatives to long-term care.

**Making it Permanent: Reasonable Efforts to Finalize Permanency Plans for Foster Care**
2002, by Cecilia Fiermonte & Jennifer L. Renne
(www.abanet.org)

The Adoption and Safe Families Act requires that permanency plans for children be determined at permanency hearings. Judges must make findings that the child welfare agency is making “reasonable efforts” to finalize those plans. What does this mean? How do we do it? This book is designed to help judges issue orders and resolve disputes so children move more quickly into permanent placements. It guides child advocates on eliciting information on agency efforts to move children into permanent homes. Issues addressed include: determining the permanency plan; assessing reasonable efforts to finalize a permanency plan for reunification, termination of parental rights/adoption, legal guardianship, relative placement, and another planned permanent living arrangement; handling interstate placements (and use of the Interstate Compact); and securing adoption subsidies. It also includes checklists and sample court forms and court orders, the text of relevant ASFA regulations, an ASFA timeline chart, and a resource directory.

**A Community Outreach Handbook for Recruiting Foster Parents and Volunteers**
Kathy Barbell and Lisa Sheikh
800/407-6273, Email: cwla@pmds.com

Recruiting foster families is a difficult task even under the best of circumstances, and most agencies are not blessed with the best of circumstances. Yet agencies can significantly increase their chances of successfully finding foster families and volunteers by designing a carefully planned strategy for engaging the community in foster care. This handbook provides tools to craft effective messages for the public, tips for working with the media, and other research ideas.

**The Child Advocate’s Legal Guide: Effective Collaborative Work to Speed Permanence for Children in Foster Care**
1995 by Debra Ratterman Baker, J.D. & Charlotte Vick, J.D.

Designed to address social service and legal issues that create foster care drift, this guidebook provides legal analysis and proposes practical solutions on issues such as kinship care, open adoption, and termination of parental rights.

**Ethical Child Welfare Practice**
by Martin G. Lever, (www.cwla.org)

This book is a hands-on guide, addressing a range of topics specific to child welfare, including: integrity, handling unethical actions by others, self-determination, informed consent, confidentiality and conflicts of interest. A series of case studies at the end of each chapter offer readers the opportunity to apply the concepts they have learned and further equip them to make ethically sound decisions in the best interests of the children, youth, and the families they serve.

**A Framework for Foster Care Reform: Policy and Practice to Shorten Children’s Stays**
1997 by Kate Welty, M.A.

Child welfare professionals are searching for strategies to address the barriers that keep children in foster care longer than expected. In response, this framework explores the interplay between family characteristics and system barriers, and suggests reforms in public policy, program management, and program operations to remove the barriers that prolong the stay of children and youth in foster care.
**Reports**

**The Impact of AFSA on Children and Families of Color** (www.cwla.org)

These forum excerpts focus on all aspects of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA). Participants characterize the strengths and challenges of families and communities of color and explore the effects of ASFA on kinship care, adoption, and youth in care. First person experiences with the child welfare system are included, as well as extensive recommendations for improvement in child welfare policies, programs, and practices, especially as they affect children and families of color.

**Siblings in Out-of-Home Care—Sibling Symposium** (www.casey.org)

On May 19-20, 2002, the CNC and the Florida-based Neighbor to Family Program co-sponsored the National Leadership Symposium on Siblings in Out-of-Home Care. Over 30 individuals from diverse fields, including foster care alumni, child welfare practitioners and policymakers, legal experts, resource families, and researchers joined us to explore ways to focus attention on issues affecting brothers and sisters in foster, kinship, and adoptive placements. We are pleased to present the full Proceedings of the Symposium, along with an Overview of our work and positions on what we believe good practice should be in working with siblings in the child welfare system.

**Life Skills Among Adolescents in Long-Term Foster Care**

Chris Downs, et al, (206-270-4902, email: cdowns@casey.org)

Using percentages of mastery as indices of life skills attainment in a variety of skills areas, this report found that youth rated themselves higher in percentages of mastery on a wide range of life skills compared with ratings made of them by their caregivers.

**Videos**

**The Power of Choice -Video Series for High School Age Youth** (nrccys.ou.edu)

In this 12-part, award-winning PBS television series, teen counselor and comedian Michael Pritchard helps young people discover that they have the power of choice, are responsible for the choices they make, and that they owe it to themselves to choose the best. He covers various subjects including: The Power of Choice, Acting on Your Values, Self-Esteem, Coping with Pressures, Drugs and Alcohol, Sex and Communicating with Parents.

**Through My Eyes: A Journal for Teens**

Linda Kranz (nrccys.ou.edu)

Teens are faced with a myriad of changes and challenges that often give rise to new thoughts, feelings, and concerns about themselves, their relationships and the world around them. Writing about these changes can be very helpful, but the difficult question is where to start? This journal by Linda Kranz’s journal offers young people the inspiration and a place to begin expressing themselves.

**The Permanency Toolkit Series**

North American Council on Adoptable Children, Tel # 651-644-3036 (www.nacac.org)

This video series is designed to: (1) Offer specific court-endorse, effective strategies to help meet AFSA timelines and achieve permanency for children in a timely fashion, (2) Introduce essential aspects of mediation, family group decision-making, and concurrent planning, (3) Place the approaches in the context of children's emotional development and timelines. Actual courtroom, mediation, family decision-making, and concurrent planning families illustrate the three strategies. Spokespersons include judges, social service administrators, attorneys, program originators/innovators and experienced case and court workers.

**Searching for Family:**

Moments in the Lives of Children in Foster Care

created by Kurt Streeter

a production of KCTS Television/Seattle (www.casey.org)

This 19-minute video “Searching for Family” examines the personal stories of Robert, Jamil and Joaquin, highlighting important issues for children and families in the foster care system. It is designed to stimulate discussions with community and business leaders, educators, policymakers, communities of faith and neighborhood organizations.

**Concurrent Planning Strategies for Implementation**

On February 13th the NRCFCPP sponsored a web-based broadcast highlighting the issues confronting states in implementing concurrent planning models. The archived conference can be downloaded for a limited time from our website: www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp
2003 Family Group Decision-Making Conference

Minneapolis • June 4-7, 2003

Information about the Conference can be located at www.fgdm.org or call 303-792-9900

Sponsored by the National Center on Family Group Decision Making (A program of American Humane)