

Concurrent Planning

Compiled by Constance Cohen, Retired Juvenile Judge

Concurrent planning is the process by which a permanency team most frequently **plans** with children, youth and families to reunite while simultaneously considering and preparing to implement one of the other permanency **plans** as enumerated in current federal legislation, such as adoption or placement with a legal guardian.

Concurrent planning is an approach that seeks to eliminate delays in attaining permanent families for children in the foster care system. Concurrent planning involves considering all reasonable options for permanency at the earliest possible point following a child's entry into foster care and concurrently pursuing those options that will best serve the child's needs. Typically the primary plan is reunification with the child's family of origin. In concurrent planning, an alternative permanency goal (e.g., adoption) is pursued at the same time rather than being pursued sequentially after reunification has been ruled out. The National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections (n.d.) identifies the following nine core components of concurrent planning:

1. Differential assessment and prognostic case review. An individualized understanding of the personal, interpersonal, and environmental context of the child and family through initial assessments of safety and risk, in-depth assessment of family functioning, and child evaluation is combined with a consideration of factors that make timely reunification more or less difficult and more or less likely.
2. Full disclosure to all participants in the case planning process. A respectful, candid discussion.
3. Family search and engagement
4. Family group conferencing/teaming
5. Parent-child visiting during out-of-home care
6. Setting clear time limits for permanency decisions. Establishing a timeframe in which both reunification and alternative permanency options are pursued helps focus case planning on early and intensive services to enhance a parent's ability and willingness to make necessary changes.
7. Transparent written agreements and documentation give all parties a clear understanding of what both the agency and the family must do to achieve

reunification. (Set Permanency Hearing “unless otherwise ordered” at Disposition)

8. Committed collaboration between child welfare, the courts, and service providers is necessary to ensure that timely casework is paired with smooth progress of cases through the court. Support from service providers, including foster parents, ensures that all parties are working toward the same goals.

9. Specific recruitment, training, and retention of dual licensed resource families

How Has the Practice of Concurrent Planning Progressed?

Since the 1970s, child welfare agencies have sought ways to reduce children’s time in foster care and expedite paths to permanency. One method developed at this time was the foster-adoptive program, which placed children with pre-adoptive families prior to the termination of parental rights (TPR). The pre-adoptive family would agree to adopt the child if the parental rights were terminated. Whereas the primary focus of foster-adoptive programs was adoption, concurrent planning works simultaneously toward both reunification and an alternate permanent family. Additionally, under the concurrent planning model, the pre-adoptive parents are expected to support reunification efforts.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 paved the way for the legal sanction of concurrent planning in States by requiring that agencies make reasonable efforts to find permanent families for children in foster care should reunification fail and stating that these efforts could be made concurrently with reunification attempts (D’Andrade, Frame, & Berrick, 2006). The use of concurrent planning has steadily grown over the past two decades. The number of State statutes that, at a minimum, allow for concurrent planning to occur increased from approximately 33 in 2003 to 38 in 2009. Statutes in some States require the practice.

What Have the Child and Family Services Reviews Identified Regarding Concurrent Planning in States?

While concurrent planning is not directly assessed in relation to the CF SR outcomes and indicators, it is mentioned in 51 of the 52 (DC & PR) State Final Reports in round 1, and in all 52 reported in round 2.

Over the course of two review cycles, *at least 21 States have linked concurrent planning to positive results; these include reduced time to permanency and establishing appropriate permanency goals, enhanced reunification or adoption efforts by engaging parents, and reduced time to adoption finalization.* In round 2 of the CF SRs, only 11 States linked concurrent planning to positive results.

- At least 41 States have formal concurrent planning policies (an increase from 9 States in the first round). These policies describe the circumstances under which concurrent planning must be practiced, such as mandating concurrent planning upon children's entry into foster care, encouraging concurrent planning when it is in the child's best interests and mandating the practice when the court orders it, and requiring concurrent planning in cases with poor prognosis indicators (such as cases where waiver of reasonable efforts should be considered).
- All 52 State reports indicate that concurrent planning is being implemented to varying degrees.
- At least 20 States provide concurrent planning training to child welfare, court, or other staff. Only 11 States indicated they provided training in round 1.

A Federal summary and analysis of the first round of State reviews found that "concurrent planning efforts are not being implemented on a consistent basis when appropriate" in a majority of States (Children's Bureau, 2004). The Final Reports discussed the concerns

and difficulties related to concurrent planning in each State. One of the concerns was a disconnect between policy and practice: In some States with formal concurrent planning policies, little or no evidence of concurrent planning practices was found in case reviews. Similar findings occurred in some States in which stakeholders reported the use of concurrent planning, but little evidence supporting their assertions was found. In a number of States, concurrent goals were written in the case files, but case reviews showed that efforts toward the goals were sequential rather than concurrent.

Concurrent Planning Can Improve Outcomes for Children

The primary benefit of concurrent planning appears to be that children in foster care achieve permanency with families more quickly. A British study compared children in concurrent planning projects to children receiving traditional services and found that the children receiving concurrent planning services were placed with permanent families significantly faster and with fewer moves than the comparison group. The children in the concurrent planning projects, however, were unexpectedly much younger than the children in the comparison group, which may affect the results

In an examination of case records of 640 children in Connecticut who were legally free for adoption, Cushing and Greenblatt (2009) found that if the foster family with whom the child is living at the time of the TPR is rejected as the adoptive family, the child is 66 percent less likely to be adopted at all.

Additionally, each additional year following the TPR resulted in an 80 percent decrease in the likelihood of adoption during the study period.

The literature also suggests that openness and direct communication between birth parents and caregivers in concurrent planning may lead to more voluntary relinquishments and open adoptions—a seemingly logical outcome of this more open relationship.

Effective Concurrent Planning

- An adequate pool of concurrent caregivers who are willing and able to work toward both reunification and adoption
- Services available to support birth parents in achieving reunification-related goals
- Support from judges, attorneys, and other court personnel for concurrent planning philosophy and practice

Elements of Concurrent Planning Associated With Positive Permanency Outcomes

- Caseworker consistency. Each additional caseworker decreased the likelihood of timely permanency by 63 percent.
- Fewer placements. Each additional placement a child experienced reduced the odds of attaining timely permanency by 32 percent.

Eligibility for title IV-E assistance. Children from families that were poor enough to qualify for title IV-E eligibility were 90 percent less likely to achieve timely permanence in 12 months. Thus, ineligibility due to higher income increased the odds for timely permanency.

- Substance abuse. When parental substance abuse was identified, timely permanence was 23 times more likely.
- Court timeframes. Each day less between the initial filing and the adjudication increased the chance of timely permanence by 1 percent, and each day less between the adjudication and the order for treatment plan increased the chance by 3 percent.

- Terminology regarding foster/adoptive parents appeared to be related to differences in how foster and adoptive families were viewed as a part of the CP process. Agencies using the term “resource families” for foster/adoptive parents tended to involve them more fully in the planning process and make earlier foster/adoptive placements for children than did those who referred to such families as “legal risk.”
- More Research Is Needed Regarding the Indicators of a Poor Prognosis for Reunification (CoC, MD, MR)

Courts Play an Important Role in Concurrent Planning

Juvenile court oversight of permanency planning and decision-making for children in foster care is mandated by the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 and given time limits by Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA); the failure to achieve timely permanency is frequently connected to delays in legal proceedings (Edwards, 2007). Because most States legislatively allow for or require concurrent planning, courts are critical to the successful implementation of concurrent planning and are responsible for ensuring that agencies implement it within ASFA timeframes.

The importance of judicial involvement in concurrent planning is highlighted by a study of the Kentucky Adoption Opportunities Project (KAOP). In this model, the use of concurrent planning was combined with other permanency planning activities for achieving timely permanence: risk assessment, representation by a single attorney from initial filing to permanency, and early placement in foster/adoptive and kinship homes. These activities included changes in court procedures as well as efforts to improve communication between the child welfare agency and the courts.

While it is difficult to isolate the effect of concurrent planning on the outcomes, the KAOP children experienced fewer placement changes and shorter lengths of stay relative to the overall foster care population in their counties. Study authors were unable to identify the effect of specific activities on permanency outcomes but point to increased awareness of early assessment, adherence to timelines, reasonable efforts, and coordination, communication, and cross-system collaboration.

Staff Acceptance and Understanding Are Critical

Although child welfare staff often believe that concurrent planning is fair, necessary, and helps move children more quickly to permanency, they also emphasize that concurrent planning is stressful, requires them to gather more

information to determine permanency options early in the case, and necessitates additional training and support to implement the process effectively. The literature, as well as anecdotal reports, indicates that caseworkers often experience difficulty grappling with the tension inherent in attempting to reunite a child with his or her family while also working on an alternative permanent plan (D'Andrade et al., 2006).

It is important that both caseworkers and their supervisors accept the philosophy of concurrent planning and believe that it is possible to work in good faith with parents while at the same time planning for an alternative permanency goal. They understood in the “back end” of the system but was poorly developed and understood by frontline workers. Caseworkers often fall back on the traditional method of sequential planning.

Agency Policy Should Be Congruent With Concurrent Planning Practice

The implementation of concurrent planning also calls for close scrutiny of agency policies to assess their consistency with the philosophy and intent of this approach. Procedures for staff assignment, case review, documentation, and interaction with the courts and other service providers all have the potential to affect the success of efforts to achieve safe and timely permanency. Examples of agency policies that may help concurrent planning practice be congruent with policy include:

- Eliminating caseworker reassignment when children move from foster to adoptive status (Lutz, 2000)
- Reducing caseload size for caseworkers involved with both reunification and permanency efforts

- **Foster/Adoptive Families Must Be Well Prepared**

The concurrent planning approach demands much of foster/adoptive families, who must be well prepared and supported. They must be willing to make a permanent commitment to a child placed in their home before the child is available for adoption, while at the same time work cooperatively with the agency and family of origin to effect reunification. Their work often includes teaching and modeling skills for birth parents and other family members as well as mentoring new foster/adoptive families. Although concurrent planning made fostering more emotionally difficult for foster parents, they believed that it provided a more clearly defined role for the foster parents. Another researcher noted that one of the primary benefits of concurrent planning is that it allows the foster/adoptive parents to have a more accurate representation of the birth parents to provide to the adopted children as they grow up.

The literature commonly points to the recruitment, preparation, and support of foster/adoptive families as one of the most challenging aspects of concurrent planning. Although most foster parents reported understanding concurrent planning, existing training, services, and supports may not be adequate to meet their complex needs during this process (Gerstenzang & Freundlich, 2005).

One study indicates that foster parents should not be required to commit to adoption from initial placement, giving them an opportunity to get to know the child before making a permanent decision.

The agency should inform the birth and foster parents that the foster family will be considered a possible resource. In the interest of transparency, the Court should remind everyone at every court hearing what concurrent planning means and evaluate the viability of the existing concurrent plan.

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel”

Maya Angelou