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Family Preservation in Perspective

Anthony N. Maluccio and Edith Fein

This essay traces the family preservation movement to its permanency planning roots; discusses the principles and underlying philosophy of the movement, and suggests the appropriate context for considering further development of child welfare services.

The debate over family preservation in recent years has been building in professional journals and conference presentations as well as the popular press: Are we sacrificing the protection of our children to the ideal of salvaging damaged families? (See, for example, Gelles, 1996; Ingrassia and McCormick, 1994; and Murphy, 1993). Although family preservation initially was an exciting idea that we could all support, it has become the center of a public controversy that seriously undermines its use and progress. In order to understand the issues in this controversy, in this essay we will explore the antecedents of the family preservation movement, describe its principles and evolution, and argue for its development in an appropriate context.

Permanency Planning – An Enduring Concept

We begin with an overview on the evolution of permanency planning and its contemporary relevance.¹ As a formal movement, permanency planning emerged in the 1970s as an antidote to long-standing abuses in the child welfare system, especially the inappropriate removal of children from their homes and the recurring drift of children in foster care. Its philosophical and programmatic emphasis was on the primacy of the family as the preferred environment for child rearing. Permanency planning was then extensively promoted through the landmark, federally funded “Oregon Project,” which demonstrated that children who had been adrift in long-term care could be returned to their biological families or placed in adoption through intensive agency services emphasizing aggressive planning and casework techniques (Pike, 1976).

In the 1980s, permanency planning flourished, and the goal of a permanent family for every child was embodied in federal legislation, the “Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980” [Public Law 96-272] (Pine, 1986). This law provided federal funding for the states to promote permanency planning for children and youths coming to their attention, through subsidized adoption, procedural reforms, and preventive and supportive services to families. The resulting policies and practices throughout the country reflected the following hierarchy of options for children:

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- maintaining the child in her or his own home whenever possible
- reunification of placed children with their biological families
- adoption
- permanent or long-term foster family

Throughout the 1980s, permanency planning had a marked impact on service delivery. Among the positive effects were a substantial decrease in the numbers of children in foster care; reduction in the length of time in care for many children who needed to be placed; greater attention to the rights, roles, and needs of biological families; placement of fewer young children; reunification of placed children with their biological families whenever possible; and more adoption of older children and those with special needs.

By the end of the 1980s, however, permanency planning was increasingly questioned, not only because of management problems, such as excessive paper work and bureaucratic rigidities, but also because of the increase in the numbers of children being referred to public and private child welfare agencies, due to such dramatically growing societal problems as unemployment, poverty, family violence, substance abuse, and homelessness. Moreover, the resources required to implement all of the provisions of Public Law 96-272 never became available at the federal level.

As child welfare and other community agencies and service systems struggled to meet the more complex and multiplying needs of children and families coming to their attention, the original enthusiasm for permanency planning began to wane. Since at least the beginning of the 1990s, permanency planning has scarcely been talked about, and it is increasingly seen as an outmoded response to a complex problem (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, and Barth, 2000).

In our view, however, it is not outmoded. Indeed, it should endure, both as a philosophy and as a program, because it incorporates a basic value—namely, that every child is entitled to live in a family, preferably her or his own biological family, in order to have the maximum opportunity for growth and development. Accordingly, 15 years ago we defined permanency planning as “. . . the systematic process of carrying out, within a brief time-limited period, a set of goal-directed activities designed to help children live in families that offer continuity of relationships with nurturing parents or caretakers and the opportunity to establish life-time relationships” (Maluccio, Fein, and Olmstead, 1986: 5).

Family Preservation as An Outgrowth of Permanency Planning

In accordance with the above-noted definition, a range of programs were derived from—or were influenced by—the philosophy and implementation of permanency planning:

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broader and more liberal adoption services, supportive family reunification programs, treatment foster care, wraparound services, and formal family preservation services.

In the latter instance, as considered among others by Berry (1997), McCroskey (2001), Meezan (2000), and Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio and Barth (2000), the philosophy and practice of family preservation can be expressed in many forms, including

- community-based and culturally competent services
- placement prevention at the primary and secondary levels
- family reunification and post-reunification supports
- open adoption and post-adoption supports
- family foster care with frequent child-family visiting
- residential care with high family involvement
- termination of parental rights with some form of continued child-family contact, if appropriate

Each of these varied ways to maintain family bonds is consistent with the concepts of permanency planning, and each places emphasis on the safety, protection, and development of children and youths (Warsh, Pine, and Maluccio, 1995).

As with permanency planning, the underlying principles of family preservation imply serving children and youths at risk of out-of-home care and their families through policies and programs that

- balance concern over the parents' or children's pathology with attention to the conditions that create or sustain family dysfunctioning
- emphasize preventive and supportive services
- establish a continuum of services—from day care to residential treatment
- promote collaboration among the various helping systems, particularly child welfare, courts, education, housing, health, and income maintenance
- provide supports to child welfare workers, foster parents, and other child care personnel to encourage them in their jobs—rather than having them struggle in an unrewarding and unsupportive work environment
- address juvenile court and other legal and procedural issues that inhibit the timely decision-making required to maintain families
- provide after-care services to support the child in the biological or other permanent family following discharge from foster care (Maluccio, 1997: 4)

In addition, as noted by Sallee and Sallee (2001) following a study of the "In-Home Safety Service Programs" in Texas, expansion of funding for reduced caseloads is required to "help increase safety and reduce the risk to children." (p. 64).

Jumping from One Solution to Another

While most of the child welfare community would concur with the value of the policies and programs outlined above, in the last decade state child protection agencies, and indeed the federal government, seem to have embraced one program or philosophy or another as their designated "mission." One agency promotes broader adoption programs; another funnels resources to family reunification efforts; another publicizes child protection as its prime function. In this confusion, each program initiative is promoted as the solution to major societal problems. What has led to this state of affairs?

Part of the answer is that children's well-being is always defined in terms of the conditions of the times. For example, the poorhouse was an altruistic response to children who previously had been abandoned; orphanages were established to deal with the difficulties that had developed with farm and apprenticeship placements; foster care was a response to the growing psychological understanding of child development and the deficiencies of group care; family reunification programs were designed to deal with the excesses of foster care and the resulting "drift" phenomenon; and family preservation services were created as a preventive response to overcome some of the failures of family reunification.

Children's well-being, in turn, was always influenced by political and economic realities. That is, poorhouses required free labor in return for charity; orphanages were initially more cost-effective than individual farm placements and apprenticeships; poorly paid foster placement became financially more viable than the increasingly expensive orphanages; and family reunification and family preservation programs were justified by research that purported to demonstrate that the programs were cheaper than foster care.

Truman Capote once said that the only lesson mankind learns from history is that no one learns from history. Child welfare history should instruct us that no one program will solve all problems, yet we burden each new program with that elusive goal. Rather than shifting from one policy or program or another as the definitive solution, perhaps we should take a lesson from the permanency planning movement, namely that we focus on our core value of the importance of family, and view family preservation as *one* of a number of potential solutions to some of the problems of families facing certain personal and environmental circumstances.

With this in mind, our future priorities in child welfare should involve sustained attention to

- provision of adequate service and supports to children and families

- development of knowledge about the effectiveness of different approaches and options for diverse client groups
- greater collaboration among service providers within child welfare as well as other systems such as income maintenance, health and mental health, and juvenile justice
- greater flexibility in service delivery
- readiness to experiment with new concepts and methods (Fein and Maluccio, 1995: 5)

In pursuing these priorities, in addition to the provision of family preservation services we urgently need to address through research and debate questions such as the following, which are stimulated by the philosophy of permanency planning and its enduring significance in the contemporary world:²

- How can vulnerable parents be supported when they need assistance with housing, employment, domestic violence, or substance abuse?
- Can we make concrete, goal-directed plans to alleviate the environmental stresses imposed by inadequate employment, housing, education and drug policies?
- How can we respond more effectively to the needs of children and families of color?
- How can we focus our attention to maintaining, as well as creating, a permanent plan for each child?
- What supports do practitioners need as they go about their difficult decision-making tasks, balancing the best interest of the child with the pull of the biological family?

How can professionals cooperate in creating clarity in such crucial areas as minimal standards of care, principles and tools of risk assessment, guidelines for removal or returning home, and criteria for termination of parental rights? (Fein and Maluccio, 1995:5).³

Conclusion

As society's understanding of child well-being changes, as new ideas about children's rights evolve, and as economic and political considerations impinge on

how child welfare services are delivered, we need to be mindful of our history and to develop judgment about what to retain and what to discard from the past. Any particular program may be valuable or expendable depending on contemporary conditions. In that light, we can view family preservation in perspective, recognizing that its practice and its potential are derived from permanency planning philosophy and programming. We are then better able to appreciate that family preservation cannot solve many problems in child welfare, but can continue to play a useful role as a guiding framework for services to a variety of vulnerable families and children.

Notes

1. This section draws from Maluccio (1997).
2. See Yoo and Meezan (2001) for an extensive examination of the “historical evolution of family preservation studies in child welfare and [suggestions for] future direction for research in the field” (p. 25).
3. Pheatt, et al. (2000), also consider the impact of managed care on family preservation agencies, as experienced in the state of Texas.

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