

FAMILY-CENTERED PRACTICE

Placement Stability Considerations

Placement stability has been determined as an area needing improvement in the last two rounds of Florida's Child and Family Services Reviews (in 2001 and 2008). Research has demonstrated a strong association between frequent placement moves in foster care and poor outcomes. The following checklist items can be used by judges/magistrates in an attempt to maintain placement stability.

Generally.

- Introduce every child's hearing with a small history including the child's name, age, and placement type; number of placements up to that time; and number of days the child has been in care.
- Ask if the caregiver is present.

To DCF/ community-based care (CBC).

- If the caregiver is not present, ask if the caregiver was given timely notice of the hearing.
- If no, ask why the caregiver was not given timely notice of the hearing.
- Ask what changes, if any, have been made in the child's living arrangement and/or placement since the last hearing.
- If there has been a change, ask for the reason(s) for the change.
- Ask if the changes in placement setting are necessary to achieve the child's permanency goal or meet the child's service needs.
- Ask if an assessment of the caregiver's needs has been conducted and, if so, if the identified needs and services have been provided.
- Ask what services have been or are being provided.
- Ask what services are needed and not yet provided.
- Ask if the child has been assessed for mental health needs and if services are being provided to meet those needs.
- Ensure that DCF/CBC has arranged for the child to remain in the same school, if possible.
- If siblings are not placed together, ask why they are not placed together and ask about efforts made (when appropriate) to keep them together.
 - Ensure continuing contact between siblings, when appropriate.

Infants and toddlers.

2014 DCF data show that 54.3% of the children entering the dependency system were 0-5, and 17.8% were under one year of age. These very young children who come before the court have unique physical and mental health issues and may also have developmental delays. Research documents that the best time to improve developmental outcomes is early in life when interventions are most effective and least costly. Science also illustrates that the quality of early relationships impacts brain development and is the life-long foundation for emotional development. Therefore, relationship disruptions and multiple placements must be avoided. Frequent, therapeutic visitation has proven to accelerate reunification. Permanent placements should be made sooner rather than later to achieve the best outcomes.

- If siblings are unable to be placed together, order sibling visitation, when appropriate. Facilitating sibling visitation should become a part of the case plan as tasks for DCF/CBC and caregivers.
- Order DCF and CBC to file a written notification before children change placements or living arrangements, when possible. When it is not possible to provide the notification before the placement change or living arrangement, then ensure that DCF and the CBC file a notification immediately following the change. Make sure the GAL is involved in the placement decision.
- Order DCF/CBC to initiate pre-adoptive homestudies on all (relative and non-relative) placement possibilities identified by the parents.
- Ensure that the child is able to maintain ties with non-custodial relatives, when appropriate.
- Ask in what way the current placement supports the child's cultural identity and maintains the child's connection to his/her cultural community.
- Ensure that priority is given to adoptive parents of the child's sibling(s) over a licensed placement.
- Ensure that the CBC case worker has identified the parent's informal and formal support networks and has identified family strengths.
- Make sure the CBC case worker knows that he/she can bring the case to court if the placement begins to break down.
- Inform the CBC case worker to request a meeting of key parties to discuss the issues and work on a resolution if any issues arise with the placement.

To the child.

- Ask if there are any problems in the child's current placement.
- Discern the child's academic performance and behavior in school.
- Ask the child if he/she is a member of any extracurricular clubs or teams.
- Ask if he/she is pleased with his/her case worker.
- Ask what services are needed that he/she is currently not receiving.

Co-parenting.

- Research continues to show that co-parenting – the working together of birth parents, foster parents, and case workers for the benefit of the child – speeds up permanency and helps protect the child's development.
- Judges can promote a co-parenting philosophy in which biological families see foster parents as partners in the reunification process instead of enemies. This can be difficult since concurrently the foster families must be supported in their desire to provide permanent homes to the children that they are fostering.
- Judges can encourage foster parents to ask the birth parents questions about the child (What is his favorite food? What is he afraid of? How do you get him to go to sleep?). Judges can also make sure that foster parents are available to answer any questions that the birth parents may have (What are you telling my child about why he can't be at home? Where does he sleep? Are you trying to adopt him?).
- Lastly, judges can ensure that the case worker, birth parent, and foster parent coordinate visitation and other activities accordingly. Birth parents may be able to join their children and the foster parents at medical appointments, school activities, birthdays, holidays, summer activities, and other events in the child's life.

Source: (2010) Co-parenting: The Key to Reunification. The Reviewer. Foster Care Review Inc.

- Ask child/youth if he/she had input in his/her visitation plan.
- If no, ask child/youth for input on visitation.
- Ask if the case worker is regularly visiting the home and assessing how the placement is going.

To the parent.

- Have parents disclose relative and non-relative placement possibilities.
- Inform parents that they have a continuing duty to inform DCF of any relative who should be considered for placement throughout the dependency case.
- Order that parents be given reasonable notice of and the opportunity to attend all appointments (including medical and educational appointments) to develop a co-parenting environment with the caregivers.

To the relative caregiver.

- Ensure that the relative caregiver understands the dependency court process, his/her role as a placement resource for the child, the specific needs of the child, and how to obtain necessary referrals and appointments for the child. If the child is an infant or toddler, ensure that the caregiver understands the social and emotional needs of very young children.
- Inform the relative caregiver that he/she has the right to attend all subsequent hearings, to submit reports to the court, and to speak to the court regarding the child if he/she so desires.
- Make sure the relative caregiver has a long-term commitment to the care of the child in the event that reunification is no longer the preferred permanency goal.
- Ask what services the relative caregiver needs that he/she is currently not receiving.
- Ask if he/she is getting relative caregiver funds.
- If no, instruct DCF/CBC to coordinate with relative caregiver regarding relative caregiver funds.
- Ask if the case worker is regularly visiting the home and assessing how the placement is going.
- Inform the relative caregiver to notify the court if the placement starts to break down so the court can help problem-solve the issue.
- Inform the relative caregiver that, if any issues arise with the placement, he/she should request a meeting of key parties to discuss the issues and work on a resolution.

To the foster parent.

- Ensure that the foster parent understands the dependency court process, his/her role as a placement resource for the child, the specific needs of the child, and how to obtain necessary referrals and appointments for the child.
- Ask if the foster parent was given notice of the hearing.
- Ask what services the foster parent needs that he/she is currently not receiving.
- Ask if the case worker is regularly visiting the home and assessing how the placement is going.

- Inform the foster parent to notify the court if the placement starts to break down, so the court can help problem-solve the issue.
- Inform the foster parent that if any issues arise with the placement, to request a meeting of key parties to discuss the issues and work on a resolution.

To the guardian ad litem.

- Ensure that the GAL has an opportunity to provide relevant information.
- Ensure that the GAL was involved in the placement decision.

Other.

- Even if relatives are not available for placement, determine if relatives are available for facilitating supervised visitation or respite for foster parents.
- Set a schedule for prompt agency evaluation of possible placements.
- If the caregiver is not in court, order that the caregiver be provided notice to appear at the next hearing.
- Order a person who has or is requesting custody to submit to a mental health or substance abuse disorder assessment or evaluation. § 39.507(10), 39.521(1)(b)1; See also § 39.407(16).
- Determine if the current placement is the least disruptive and most family-like setting that meets the needs of the child.

Placement stability research findings.

- The first six months of a placement are crucial, with 70 percent of disruptions occurring within this timeframe.
- Infants who experienced multiple placements can experience problems with attachment and bonding.
- Multiple placements before age 14 have been associated with higher rates of delinquency filings after age 14. Multiple placements also increase the odds of the child dropping out of school.
- If the child has some control over the frequency and type of visitation with his/her biological family, the placement is more likely to be successful.
- Placement with relatives, after appropriate safety checks, is the safest and most stable form of substitute care that we can make available to children who are removed from parental custody. Placement with grandparents, aunts, and uncles helps reduce the trauma of separation that accompanies child removal and preserves important connections to siblings, family, and local community.