



Implementation of Concurrent Planning Practice in California: Models and Practices

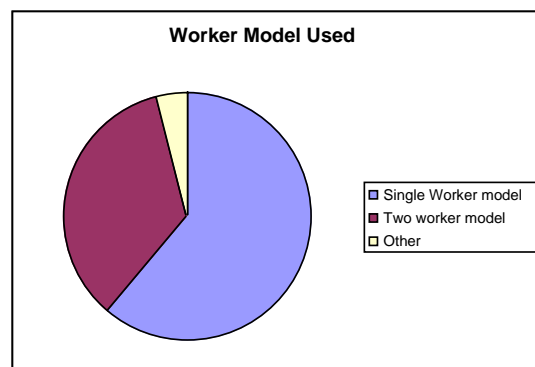
2 of 3

Concurrent planning is the practice of simultaneously offering reunification services to a child's family while searching for adoptive or guardianship homes — if the child's family fails to reunify, a permanent home is already available for the child. Concurrent planning has been heralded as a valuable tool for improving permanency outcomes within federally mandated timelines. However, concurrent planning models were developed in small, private agencies; how and with what success public agencies have been able to implement the practice with their larger caseloads and fewer resources is unclear. This document highlights the results of a survey of implementation of concurrent planning in California – the first study to systematically address how concurrent planning is being implemented in public child welfare. This document highlights the results of a survey of implementation of concurrent planning in California – the first study to systematically address how concurrent planning is being implemented in public child welfare.

The concurrent planning programs proposed by pioneers like Linda Katz have reported positive outcomes by implementing highly intensive, specialized, and structured programs of concurrent planning. However, the larger client populations of public child welfare suggest full implementation of the Katz model of concurrent planning could be difficult. This brief examines the models and practice of concurrent planning being implemented in California. This implementation study involved a survey of child welfare directors in 49 counties during 2003.

Models

- Most counties (61%) rely on single-worker models of concurrent planning, in which one worker attends to both the reunification plan and the alternative plan for permanency.



- Many practitioners and advocates of concurrent planning recommend targeting the practice toward certain groups of children, rather than attempting to apply it toward all children entering out of home care. Half of responding administrators report targeting concurrent planning in this way.

Of counties that target concurrent planning:

- ➔ 71% target children under a certain age.
- ➔ 100% target children less likely to reunify.
- ➔ 43% target based upon the availability of foster-adopt parents for a particular child.

Practice – Prognoses

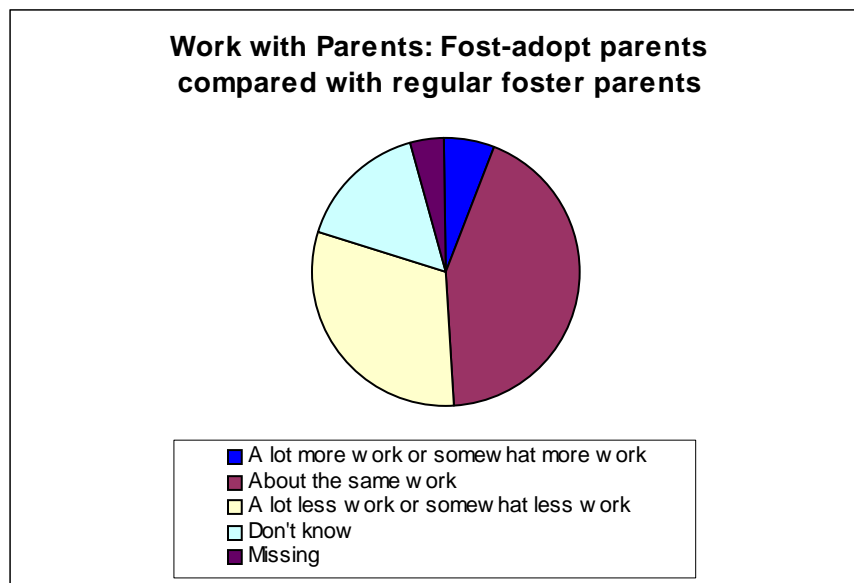
- Essential to concurrent planning is the making of an accurate, early prediction about the likelihood of reunification, so that active efforts toward an alternative placement can begin as soon as possible for children who are unlikely to return home. Most counties (65%) report making such a prognosis for children who enter out of home care.

Of those that make a prognosis:

- 62% have the court investigations or dependency investigations worker — the worker who prepares the legal case for the dispositional hearing — make the prognosis.
 - 31% have the front end or emergency worker make the prognosis.
 - 15% have the reunification worker make the prognosis.
 - 5% have another social worker make the prognosis.
- About half of the agencies report using an assessment tool to make reunification prognoses. The Katz indicators were most commonly used criteria, with 69% of counties reportedly employing that tool in assessments.

Practice – Fost-adopt parents

- Fost-adopt parents play an important role in facilitating reunification as well as making permanency commitments to children. About 40% of counties report that their fost-adopt parents “do about the same amount of work” with birth parents as regular foster parents. About 30% report fost-adopt parents do “somewhat less” or “a lot less work” with birth parents than regular foster parents.



- Almost all counties (91%) report reserving fost-adopt homes for children unlikely to reunify. Two thirds of counties reserve these homes for children under a certain age, and approximately three-quarters make these placements based upon the availability of fost-adpot parents for particular children.

Analysis

Agencies should implement single-worker models under advisement: surveys of and reports by social work practitioners of concurrent planning suggest they are struggling with their dual role. Similarly, some workers noted concurrent planning seems to result in “tension” between themselves and birth parents, and experience the two different tasks as conflicting¹. Such challenges do not necessarily imply the one-worker approach is not workable, but do suggest supports such as reduced caseloads would be of help to social workers attempting to wholeheartedly pursue both plans.

Although most agencies report targeting concurrent planning, a sizeable number do not. Concerns about both strategies — targeting and not targeting concurrent planning — have been voiced. There is some evidence that suggests a worker’s negative assessment of family strengths, skills and motivation may negatively affect both client collaboration and compliance with treatment². On the other hand, resources are limited and attempting to do concurrent planning on every case may result in a reduction of the program to the point of ineffectiveness.

Most counties indicated that court investigation workers were responsible for making the reunification prognosis. These workers spend more time with the family than do emergency response workers as they prepare the lengthy social study for the dispositional court hearing. Although court investigation workers work with families later in the case and thus delay implementation of the actual permanency plan somewhat, they are in a better place to make an accurate reunification prognosis than are emergency response workers.

Most agencies using a tool to make reunification prognoses are relying upon the Katz prognosis indicators which have not been validated through empirical research. There is the possibility that these indicators are not accurate predictors of families’ likelihood of reunification, and hence scarce resources may not be put to the most efficient use.

Because a primary role of foster-adopt parents is to facilitate reunification, the finding that 30% of these caregivers do “much less” or “somewhat less” work with birthparents than do regular foster parents may be of concern. Foster-adopt parents must not undermine or be seen as undermining reunification efforts; if they are doing less work than regular foster parents, it could certainly suggest that this is occurring. However, there may be another explanation. At times, placements in foster-adopt homes do not occur until parental failure to progress with services makes service termination appear imminent⁴. In such situations, it would be expected that foster-adopt parents would do less work with birth parents.

Using *availability of foster-adopt parents* as a decision criteria for targeting concurrent planning could be problematic. For example, if concurrent planning decisions are based upon foster-adopt availability, these efforts may be concentrated on Caucasian children, who are more likely to be adopted³. If concurrent planning has positive effects on permanency outcomes, we may see a worrisome widening of the well-known discrepancies in outcomes and time to permanency among ethnic groups of children.

1. Westat, Inc. (2001). *Assessing the context of permanency and reunification in the foster care system*. Report for the USDHHS. Retrieved February 26, 2004 from <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/fostsercare-reunif01>.

2. Littell, J.H. & Tajima, E.A. (2000). A multi-level model of client participation in intensive family preservation services. *Social Service Review*, (74) 3, 405-435.

3. Westat, Inc. (2001)

4. Berrick, J.D., Needell, B., Barth, R.P., & Jonson-Reid, M. (1998). *The tender years: Toward developmentally sensitive child welfare services for very young children*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Methods

Technical Advisory Committee

To enhance the use and relevance of this study to child welfare practice, views of representatives from child welfare stakeholder groups were solicited. County child welfare agencies, the state Department of Social Services, juvenile court personnel, and other child welfare researchers were invited to participate in a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC). TAC members assisted in developing research strategies and refining measures based upon their expertise and knowledge of the child welfare field. Feedback from the Technical Advisory Committee was solicited via meetings, letters, or occasional direct email queries.

Study sample, design and analyses

This was a cross-sectional descriptive exploratory study. A survey was mailed to child welfare directors in each of the 58 counties in California. Each child welfare director was asked to forward the survey to the employee most knowledgeable about concurrent planning implementation and practice in the county, if that person was other than him or herself. A series of mailings of letters, surveys and postcard reminders to increase response rates was done. A total of 49 of 58 surveys were returned for a response rate of 85%.

For more information, please contact:

Center for Social Services Research
School of Social Welfare
16 Haviland Hall #7400,
Berkeley CA 94720-7400

tel: 510.642.1899
fax: 510.642.1895

web: <http://cssr.berkeley.edu>