



CENTER FOR SOCIAL SERVICES RESEARCH, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY  
**CHILD WELFARE PERMANENCY REFORMS**

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## Promising Practices in Concurrent Planning:

### *Early Intensive Support Services to Birth Parents*

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This series of brief publications, *Promising Practices in Concurrent Planning*, provides descriptions of select practices identified through preliminary analysis of data from the study: **Child Welfare Permanency Reforms**. This study examines the implementation of concurrent planning in 6 California counties through focus groups and interviews with a variety of stakeholders in concurrent planning cases (i.e., social workers, supervisors, and child welfare managers; attorneys and judges; and foster parents and birth parents). Promising Practices from several non-study counties and agencies with well-developed concurrent planning approaches have also been examined. The practice approach described below represents work conducted in one or more of the following county child welfare agencies: Contra Costa, Mendocino, Monterey, Placer, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Mateo, and Yolo counties, as well as the Foster Family Agency, Sierra Adoptions. Although none of these Promising Practices have been empirically examined in terms of their impact on child and family outcomes, each of those highlighted appears to reflect and support efforts to implement concurrent planning.

**Promising Practice:** *Intensive support services to birth parents are available early in the reunification process (e.g., at Detention and Disposition), to help manage emotional reactions, facilitate responsibility-taking, educate about the child welfare intervention process, and support engagement in services.*

High quality reunification services are the foundation of an ethical concurrent planning program. In one California county, a family support agency provides services to birth parents including support groups, parenting classes and supervised visitation. Child care is offered to parents while participating in groups and classes.

All parents whose children are detained are immediately referred to the agency to begin supportive services. If the family consists of two parents, they are referred to separate support groups to address their individual needs. Parents are mandated to participate in an Intake Support Group prior to being offered additional family reunification services (with the exception of substance abuse treatment services, which are provided elsewhere).

The family support agency is funded by the public child welfare agency and is staffed with a combination of seasoned child welfare social workers/supervisors and social service aides. In addition, licensed mental health clinicians from the community are contracted to co-facilitate the therapeutic groups (facilitated by both a child welfare worker and a mental health practitioner). Some of the social service aides working for the agency are former child welfare clients who successfully completed case plans and now help others navigate the system. Services provided to birth parents through the agency are as follows:

### **Intake Support Group**

- An eight week support group available to the parents directly after detention of their children.
- The group's goal is to help the parent deal with anger, confront denial, and become educated about the court process and the child welfare system.
- Facilitators help parents understand the life changes necessary in order to "get CPS out of their lives."
- Facilitators conduct a Mental Health assessment of the parent, which assists the child welfare agency and the court in developing a case plan that will help the parent meet case goals.
- After two sessions of the Intake Support Group a case conference is held (for the purpose of information sharing), bringing together the group facilitators, the birth parent and the child welfare worker.

### **Family Empowerment Plan**

- An "Empowerment Plan" is developed subsequent to completion of the Intake Support Group and prior to the parent joining an Empowerment Group. This plan is a step-by-step blueprint of what the parent needs to do in order to reunify with his/her children.
- Participants in the Empowerment Plan Meeting include the parent, the social worker and the Empowerment Group facilitator.
- The purpose is to review the case plan (using a strengths-based perspective), establish goals and objectives, establish a time line, and begin to build a relationship between the Empowerment Group facilitator and the parent.

### **Empowerment Group**

- A four to six week group during which the participants set weekly action plans and gain awareness of their personal strengths and limitations.
- The group consists of "veteran" child welfare clients as well as parents new to the system. This promotes the sharing of information and experiences between group participants.
- During this stage of the case plan there are weekly progress reports between the group facilitators and the child welfare worker. Through this open line of communication, adjustments can be made to the case plan based on the parent's success or lack of success.
- After completion of the Empowerment Group, case conferences and case reviews are scheduled as needed.

Child welfare staff report that the program has been successful with birth parents in general, and that it offers a context in which birth parents can be provided with information about concurrent planning. "We are not trying to tell the families what to do... We inform them of the steps that the Court requires and then ask them what else they need. This is a good process and another place to bring up the fact that, if they fail to reunify, adoption is a possible outcome for their children."

In focus groups, birth parents report very positive experiences with agency services. Participants report feeling a sense of emotional safety in the groups, that the facilitators are "real people" that "don't tell you what to do" but instead "give you other roads to take... give you ideas." The services offer birth parents a forum in which they feel "safe from repercussions" and that it "makes it a lot easier... to do what you have to do." Participants report learning parenting skills, including how to conduct a family meeting and how to validate children's feelings. They found it beneficial that the staff arranged and participated in meetings with social workers, in which the agency's expectations could be clarified. One birth parent suggested that as a result of her involvement in services, the positive change in relation to her family could be described as the difference between "light and dark;" another stated that the agency staff "saved my life."

