Enacted Permanence in foster care

Mandi MacDonal
m.macdonald@qub.ac.uk
Policy definition of ‘permanence’

- A sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity throughout childhood and beyond.
- Provision of a secure, stable and loving family through transitions out of care and into adulthood.
- Bringing up children not just for childhood but for life.
Dimensions of permanence

- Legal security
- Placement stability
- Continuity of care

- Felt security
- Sense of belonging

- Identity
- Dual connection
- Not feeling torn

- Family membership
- Behaving as if relationships will last

(adapted from Bullock et al, 2006)
Subjective and enacted permanence

- **Patterns of perceived belonging Biehal (UK)**
  - ‘as if’ –
    - primary identification with foster carers; viewed them ‘as if’ they were their parents
  - ‘just like’ –
    - belonging to birth and foster families; foster carers viewed as ‘just like’ another set of parents
  - qualified –
    - ambivalent feelings toward birth family; loyalty conflicts; ambivalent about belonging in foster family
  - **Provisional** –
    - Uncertain; placement close to disruption
Subjective and enacted permanence

- Patterns of family membership Ellingsen et al (Norway)
- Confident and well adjusted
  - Viewed both birth and foster families as ‘family’ loved by both
  - Sure of foster family as secure base in the future
- Bonds strong with birth family / weak with foster family
  - Birth relatives viewed as only family
  - Ambivalent about approaching foster carers for support
- Bonds weak with birth family / strong with foster family
  - Sure of permanent support from foster family
  - Birth family contact stressful
Felt belonging

- Young people can include foster and birth relatives as family
- Inclusive understandings of enduring kinship not solely defined by blood or legal ties
- Care, love, support, availability are primary criteria for kinship
- Foster family can be a secure base into adulthood
- Echoed in foster carer definitions of permanence = lifelong commitment and family obligation (Schofield et al 2012)
Family practices

- **Family practices** (Morgan, 2011; Smart, 2007)

- How family relationships are made and maintained through everyday activities

- ‘family’ as a verb and a noun

- ‘doing’ family rather than ‘having’ family
Family display

- Family members showing one another and the world that they are engaging in family relationships and not some other form of relationship
- Showing who belongs to our family
- ‘These are my family relationships and they work’
- (Finch, 2000)
Family life

- ‘normal’ family routines
- kinship labels – ‘mum’ ‘dad’
- being treated no differently
- connecting past, present and future
- who’s photo is on the wall?

We have reared them and bathed them and educated them and nursed them through sickness and loved them and it's funny ... I do feel nearly like I gave birth to them.
Displays of care and commitment

“I first bonded with him when he broke his arm, funny enough. Suddenly I saw his vulnerability and he also saw something in me at that time too because I sat up with him all night. I remember him going ‘you stayed with me all night’. I know that was important to him and for me.”
Family rituals

- ‘just us’ times
- Family holidays, outings
- Inclusion in special celebrations
- Public displays
Birth family contact

- Scaffolding relationships over time
- Explore wider kin networks
  - Natural mentoring
  - Family finding
- Who to include in contact –
  - Protective
  - Accepting
  - Minimise loyalty conflicts

They obviously didn’t want anyone else to be the mum
Professional practices

- Formal recognition
- Experience of formal reviews
- Delegated parental authority
- What messages do professionals give about permanence?
- Professional language – foster carer or foster parent?
- Role of leaving care social workers
- Critique the goal of independent living
- Scaffold existing and new kin networks
- Permission to develop family bonds
Summary

- Thinking early and planning ahead for relationships that will provide an enduring secure base
- Importance of family practices and enacted permanence
- Supporting child’s sense of belonging
- Supporting young person’s dual connection to foster and birth family
- Consider the long long-term – supportive relationships into adulthood
references


