

## IN SUPPORT OF FAMILIES AND THEIR CHILDREN

All children belong with families and families need support to thrive.

**Part I: All children belong in families.**

### BACK TO BASICS: WHY?

**DEVELOPMENTAL NEED:** Children grow and develop through a process called attachment. Attachment is a fundamental framework for human development. It requires that a child be emotionally connected to at least one adult caregiver who can provide an enduring, nurturing relationship that provides the safety and structure necessary for a child to feel a secure base. Much research shows that children deprived of such a base are harmed in their development.



We tend to lose sight of the child's need for a secure base when we focus on family only as a caregiving function. Caregiving can be done by interchangeable others. A secure base reflects a deeper relationship, one that is not easily interchangeable. The meaning of family needs to be understood from a much deeper perspective than caregiving. Family is the basic unit of social organization from which we draw our sense of who we are in the world, our sense of belonging, our sense of the world as a safe place and the people in it as trustworthy. Inadequate, insecure or unsafe family life threatens one's identity and sense of worth and the expectation of having a legitimate place in the world. Children who have an insecure attachment to an enduring adult fail to thrive. There is a lot at stake in the environment of childhood development.

**DEVELOPMENTAL RIGHT:** This base is so necessary that it has been built into federal legislation that protects children who do not have it. Children whose family homes are not safe or nurturing are protected in all states and by federal legislation that allows them to be removed from parents who cannot provide this secure base. There is a second factor attached to the protection of federal legislation. Child welfare law recognizes that the connection with birth families is so special and so important that it requires that every effort is made to prevent removal of a child or to assure a child can return to his or her family if removal is necessary. Legislation provides yet one more protection, that is the pursuit of a permanent arrangement. If it is not possible to assist a family to resume care of the child in a reasonable length of time, the child should be assured another family who will make a permanent commitment to provide a safe, nurturing, enduring relationship.



The law applies to children who are served by child welfare agencies. Children with disabilities who are served by disability organizations have frequently been excluded from these protections. The rationale that underpins the legislation is that a child's growth and development require the secure base of an enduring relationship; the exclusion of children with disabilities implies they are not in need of, or cannot benefit from, environments that promote growth and development. The process and application of these ideas is called "permanency planning." Permanency planning is a fundamental right of childhood that applies to children with disabilities as it does to all children.

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## Part II: All families need support to thrive.

### HOW TO ASSURE FAMILIES FOR ALL CHILDREN?

There are two fundamental ways in which the human need and right to be part of a family can be assured: (1) by supporting families and (2) by intentionally planning for permanency. These two ideas are different but complementary.

**SUPPORTING FAMILIES:** All families need some support to thrive and carry out their function of child rearing. Many families are supported through their own personal networks. Some families need additional support. Sometimes they need support that is organized by formal service systems. When a family's personal network is insufficient to support them, the formal service system is obligated to provide "whatever it takes" to assure the child's place in their home. Supporting families is a process reflecting a guiding intention. Family support is not a program; it is an attitude.



**PERMANENCY PLANNING:** Permanency Planning is the process of negotiating arrangements that will assure enduring bonds and a nurturing home to grow up in. When a family is unwilling or unable to accept supports to enable them to raise their child at home, then the formal service system is obligated to assure that the child has a permanent, secure, safe, nurturing family home to grow up in. When a birth family is unable or unwilling to provide the nurturing home full time within their own extended family network, then the formal service system is obligated to enter into negotiations with them for an alternate arrangement that will assure that the child's developmental need for permanence can be met. This effort may include exploring shared parenting or recruiting alternate families. It also must include consideration of both parental choice and children's best interests.

**Shared Parenting:** Sometimes the most effective support for a family may be to expand their network to include others. Another family who can share in the care and nurturing of a child can be an effective support for a birth family and provide an enduring relationship for a child. A shared parenting arrangement can be experienced like an addition to the extended family. Shared parenting arrangements are tailored to the unique situation of a specific family. Arrangements may range from intermittent short term, to regular part time, to temporary full time, to long term full time shared parenting.

**Recruiting Alternate Families:** When no one within a birth family's personal networks is available, the formal support system is obligated to recruit for families who would be willing to become the child's family. Recruiting is done by exploring how to arrange for the best alternate family. The first choice of an alternate family is a family within the child's extended family. The next choice is to explore possible families within the child's personal network. When the arrangement involves long term full time care, then adoption is the clearest assurance of commitment of the alternate family to permanence for the child. Open adoption is a mechanism for the birth family to participate in the selection of an alternate family and remain a part of the child's life even though they may not be able to raise the child themselves.



**Parental Choice And Children's Best Interest:** Often parental choice and a child's best interest are congruent with each other. Sometimes they are not. When a parental choice leads to lack of permanence for a child, then the child's best interests may not be served. Sorting out the issues involved can be very complex and very emotionally charged. They cannot be managed abruptly or disrespectfully. While it may be uncomfortable for a parent to face the possibility of not raising their child, most parents can be helped to make a plan based on their child's best interest if they understand the importance of family life for a child. The formal system is obligated to explore these issues sensitively but persistently. The formal system is simultaneously obligated to assure the recruitment of quality alternate families. The formal system should provide for the birth family's participation in the selection of a particular alternate family. Sensitive and respectful exploration with the birth family coupled with readily available quality alternative families can shift the seeming dilemma from an adversarial struggle to a mutual pursuit of resolution. A prerequisite is a stance in support of permanence for children.

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Prepared by Nancy Rosenau, May 2000

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