



Why should child welfare and schools focus on minimising placement change as part of permanency planning for children?

Peter J Pecora and Danielle Huston

Introduction

For every child, education is critical to successful transition to adulthood. The need of foster children for a stable education, however, is often neglected by an overburdened child welfare system that is concerned primarily with children's physical safety. This article will discuss reasons why a focus on minimising placement change should be a vital aspect of permanency planning.

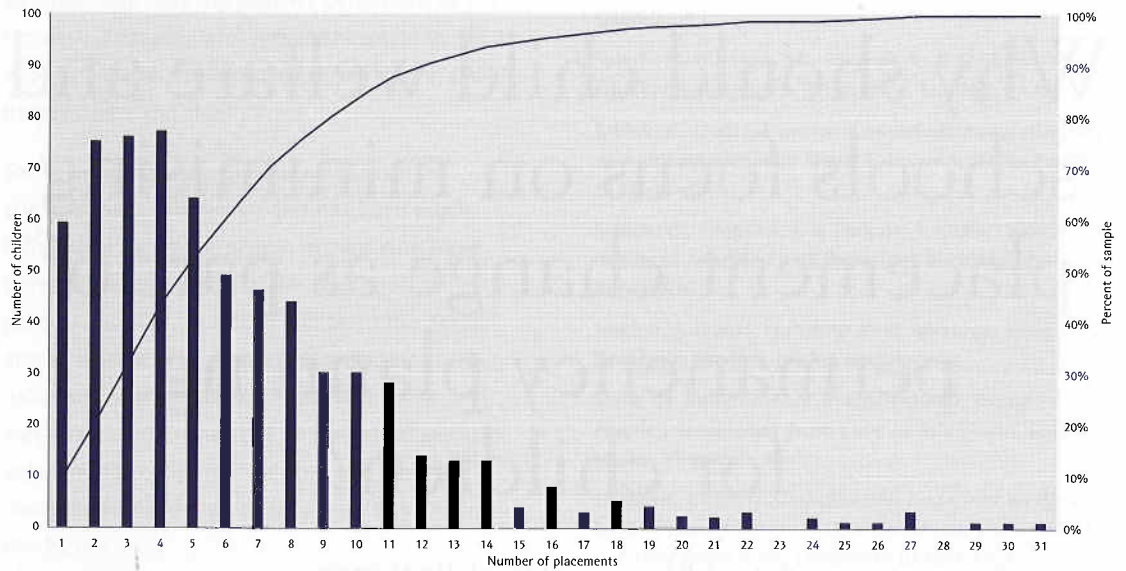
In the United States nationally, many infants and adolescents are placed in foster care as a refuge for a few months while their birth parents improve their functioning or their living situation. However, about 50% of youths leaving foster care in the United States have spent one year or more in care (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). Wilson (2000) found that 63% of youth in Washington state foster care had one or two placements, while 77%

of the youth in James (2004), California study had three or more placements. These variations illustrate the need to account for the amount of time spent in care when comparing the number of placements across samples.

Similarly, the number of placements varies widely across children and young people in care, and across agency sub-samples. For example, in a study of three child welfare agencies (two states and one voluntary agency), about one-third (31.9%) of the children experienced three or fewer placements, but an equal percentage (32.3%) experienced eight or more placements throughout their child welfare experience (see Pecora, Kessler, Williams et al, 2005; Pecora, Kessler, Hiripi et al, 2006). While over one-half of the sample had five or fewer placements (including one-fifth with only one or two placements), slightly more than one-fifth had ten or more placements. The cumulative percent line

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Figure 1: Distribution of the number of placements experienced by the northwest foster care children, with cumulative percent and range groupings



Source: Pecora, P.J., Kessler, R.C., Williams, J., Downs, A.C., English, D., White, J. & O'Brien, K. (forthcoming). *What Works in Foster Care?* Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

in figure 1 indicates that approximately 95% of the sample had 15 or fewer placements, while the remaining 5% had as many as 31 placements (for more detailed discussion of the study see Pecora, Kessler, Williams et al, forthcoming).

The experiences of these children while in care have important ramifications for their development and for identifying ways to improve permanency planning. The next sections discuss five reasons why a focus on minimising placement change should be a vital aspect of permanency planning.

Why a focus on minimising placement change should be a vital aspect of permanency planning

1. Minimise child pain and trauma

First, children entering out-of-home care undergo enormous changes. Apart from being separated from their family, many of these children are not able to maintain relationships

with friends and community members (Johnson, Yoken & Voss, 1995). Changing homes because of placement disruption compounds the immeasurable sense of loss these children must face by leaving behind relationships again and again. Festinger's (1983) landmark study of 277 children in care, entitled *No One Ever Asked Us*, revealed that most children experienced placement changes as unsettling and confusing. When rating their perception of foster care, the children's satisfaction was inversely correlated with the number of placements they had experienced.

In a longitudinal study of 212 maltreated and non-maltreated adolescents, Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl and Egolf (2003) found transitions in caretakers and residency had a statistically significant relationship to indicators of deviant behavior (delinquency, drug use, alcohol use, school dropout, and status offenses). Even though childhood maltreatment is a risk factor for adolescent deviance, the risk is greater

for those who experience more transitions in living situations in childhood. Therefore, more research is needed that builds on the personal perspectives of the youth in care in order to assess the trauma experienced, minimise youth pain and increase stability (Unrau, 2007).

2. *Lessen child attachment as well as emotional and behavioural disorders*

Decreasing the opportunities for children to attach often increases the chances a child will have emotional and behavioral disorders. Wulczyn, Cogan and Harden (2002, p. 2) cited this important child development-related reason:

Multiple placements are thought to have a pernicious impact on the development of attachment to primary caregivers, an early developmental milestone thought to be essential for the achievement of later developmental tasks (e.g. Lieberman, 1987; Provence, 1989; Fahlberg, 1991).

While the concept of child and adolescent attachment to adults is not an exact science and we have much to learn about helping children build new positive attachments, many youth and foster care children have commented on how important it is to minimise placement change and to be placed with siblings as a placement stabilising strategy (Leathers, 2005; Herrick & Piccus, 2005).

In addition, various researchers have found that multiple placements may lead to child behaviour problems (Newton, Litrownik & Landsverk, 2000), and mental health problems (Rutter & Sroufe, 2000). Indeed, Ryan and Testa (2004) found that these changes were linked with decreased school performance and delinquent

behaviour of males. Finally, these findings were reinforced in a study of 479 foster care children from two state public and one private child welfare agency in the Northwest that found that a more stable placement history was strongly linked with most of the major outcome domains and specific variables like having fewer mental health diagnoses (Pecora, Kessler, Williams et al, forthcoming). Children who experienced a low or medium placement change rate were 1.7 and 1.4 times as likely, respectively, as those who experienced a high placement change rate to have no 12-month Composite International Diagnostic Interview (CIDI) diagnosis (O'Brien et al, 2008).

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Interestingly, Barber and Delfabbro (2004) in an Australian study found that most children in foster care display improvements in their psychological adjustment while in care. Surprisingly, these improvements can

occur despite frequent placement disruption during the first eight months in care. Beyond the eight-month point, however, placement disruption is associated with psychological deterioration. The basic explanation for this finding concerns change in the reasons for placement move up to and beyond the eight-month point. Many children change placement in the first eight months for positive reasons, such as to get closer to their families or to go to a better school. Beyond the eight-month point, however, those children who continue moving tend to do so because their foster placements break down. In other words, the concentration of difficult or distressed children is greater among those who move around for more than eight months than among those who move around for eight months or less (Knott & Barber, 2004).

3. Decrease school mobility and increase academic achievement

Third, placement stability decreases school mobility and increases academic achievement. Educational research has documented the negative impacts of changing schools. A 1996 study of students in Chicago Public Schools found that students who had changed schools four or more times had lost approximately one year of educational growth by their sixth school year (Kerbow, 1996). A California study found high school students who changed schools even once were less than half as likely to graduate as those who did not experience a change in schools. This was found even after controlling for other variables that affect high school completion (Rumberger et al, 1999). In addition, those children who experience a school change score lower on standardised tests by 16 to 20 percentile points in comparison to children who did not experience a school change. Unfortunately this difference seems to widen as the children grow older (Calvin, 2001).

Although standardised test scores are not the sole gauge of a student's academic ability, they provide a worthwhile indicator of a student's relative educational achievement. Burley and Halpern (2001) recently summarised findings

from statewide analysis of the educational attainment of youth in Washington state public schools who were also in foster care. Table 1 illustrates the percentage of youth who change schools during the course of the school year, participate in special education programmes, and stay at the same grade level for more than one year (Burley & Halpern, 2001).

Two Chapin Hall studies revealed substantial levels of school mobility associated with placement in out-of-home care. For example, of the adolescents interviewed in the three-state ageing-out study, over a third reported five or more school changes (Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004). In Chicago, school mobility was highest among those elementary school students entering foster care – over two-thirds change schools – and lower for children in care for two or more years (28%) and those exiting care (20 to 25%). School mobility among children in out-of-home care is highly correlated with the number of locations at which a child in care lives during an academic year (Courtney, Roderick et al, 2004).

While many child welfare staff, some state laws, and a proposed new federal law try to minimise school change when a placement

Table 1: Factors related to student achievement for foster students

| Event | Percent of Students | | | | | | Associated test score percentile ranking increase (decrease) for foster youth | | |
|---|---------------------|-------------|---------|-------------|---------|-------------|---|---------|---------|
| | Grade 3 | | Grade 6 | | Grade 9 | | Grade 3 | Grade 6 | Grade 9 |
| | Foster | School Avg. | Foster | School Avg. | Foster | School Avg. | | | |
| Attended another school during present year | 20% | 10% | 16% | 7% | 19% | 7% | (12.9) | (9.8) | (10.5) |
| Currently enrolled in special education program | 23% | 9% | 29% | 10% | 24% | 8% | (27.9) | (28.5) | (32.0) |
| Stayed in same grade more than one year | 15% | 8% | 13% | 6% | 15% | 7% | (16.3) | (12.5) | (7.7) |

Source: Burley, M. & Halpern, M. (2001). *Educational Attainment of Foster Youth: Achievement and graduation outcomes for children in state care*. Olympia, Washington: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

changes, in too many situations the child is forced to change schools. School mobility has been implicated as a clear risk factor for school dropout (Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Rumberger, 2003). David Kerbow's (1996) longitudinal study of school mobility in Chicago found that it acted as both an individual and school level risk factor for low achievement. Highly mobile students fell almost a year behind in achievement by sixth grade. While the highest mobility rates (31%) were among children of single parent families, it is notable that the second highest mobility rate (25%) was observed for children in households with no biological parent present (Stone, 2007). But the relationship among these variables is complex and care needs to be taken when interpreting these findings.

Given the negative impacts of school mobility, many have questioned the extent to which this may be a particular problem with foster children (Conger & Finkelstein, 2003). The relationship between placement transfers and several academic outcomes has been discussed above. Two recent studies control for both placement and school transfers on selected academic outcomes. Conger and Rebeck's (2001) study actually found increases in attendance after school transfers. School transfers were unrelated to reading achievement, but had a small negative effect on mathematics achievement. A stronger predictor of school achievement was school attendance. Burley and Halpern (2001) found that school transfers were negatively related to test scores for third (7-8 years old) and sixth grade (about 10-11 years old) students, but not ninth graders (14-15) and high school completion (not controlling for prior school performance and attendance). These results suggest that: the nature and

quality of school transfers matter; school transfers may have different relationships with different academic outcomes; and perhaps not surprisingly, attendance loss may at least partially explain negative effects of school transfers among foster youth (Stone, 2007).

On a more positive note, in the Casey national study of 1,082 foster care children and young people throughout the country, youths who had had one fewer placement change per year were almost twice as likely to graduate from high school before leaving care (Pecora, Kessler, Hiripi et al, 2006). These findings were reinforced in the Northwest Foster Care Study, which found that a more stable placement history was strongly linked to greater education achievement such as high school completion and completion of educational coursework or vocational training beyond high school (Pecora, Kessler, Williams et al, forthcoming). For example,

children who experienced a low or medium placement change rate were 4.6 and 2.7 times as likely, respectively, as those who experienced a high placement change rate to complete high school with a diploma (O'Brien, Kessler, Hiripi et al, 2008).

4. Maximise continuity in services, decrease foster parent stress, and lower programme costs

Placement changes disrupt services provision, stress foster parents (thereby lowering retention rates), take up precious worker time, and create administrative-related disruptions (e.g., Flower, McDonald & Sumski, 2005; James, 2004). Because we know so little about what causes placement change, the field is less able to predict and therefore prevent it. And yet the dynamics of these changes are important for other reasons. For example, adolescents who were placed alone

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after a history of joint sibling placements were at greater risk for placement disruption than those who were placed with a consistent number of siblings while in foster care. This association was mediated by a weaker sense of integration and belonging in the foster home among youth placed alone with a history of sibling placements (Leathers, 2005).

5. Increase the likelihood that a child will establish an enduring positive relationship with a caring adult

Clearly, the more stability a child has, the more likely it is that the child will be able to develop enduring relationships with adults who care about him or her. It also enables a child to establish a stronger and more varied network of social support to help meet emotional as well as more concrete needs such as moving house.

Why placement dynamics and worker stability are important to permanency planning success

James (2004) made a major contribution to this area by finding that child behaviour problems, while significant, constituted the reason for a placement change in only 19.7% of the situations. This contrasted with 'system or policy-related' reasons (70%) such as a move to a short-term or long-term care facility, move to be placed with a sibling or relative, group home closure, or move to be closer to a relative or certain school (James, 2004). Note that even some of these 'system or policy-related' reasons actually stem from what might be thought of as sound practice decisions to help a child reach a more permanent or developmentally enhancing living situation.

A recent study of 'frequent movers' in Kentucky foster care, found that those who were at higher risk of four or more moves were females aged 12-15, young black males, children coming into care because of sexual abuse victimisation and child behaviour problems, prior psychiatric hospitalisation, and those who moved quickly from their first placement, especially for behaviour reasons or the need for special services (Huebner, 2007). Some of these factors were also identified in a meta-analysis of placement disruption research by Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens and Doreleijers (2007):

(a) older age at placement, (b) behaviour problems, (c) prior placement in residential treatment, and (d) number of previous placements.

Protective factors that would lower the risk of placement change include:

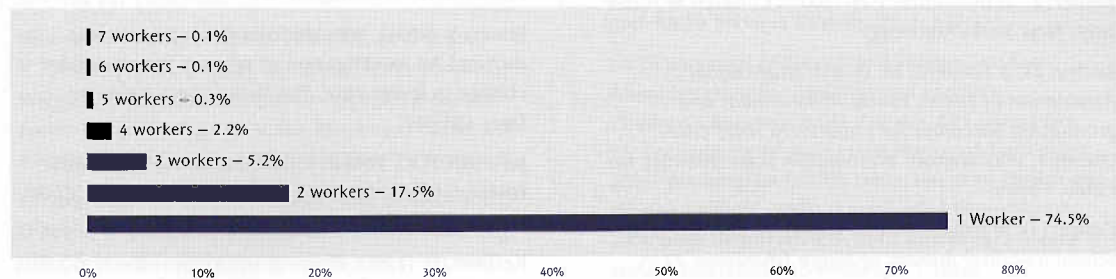
- quality of foster parent caregiving
- foster parent motivation
- ability of foster parents to address the behavioural and emotional needs of the children
- family resources
- foster parents who welcome and accept the child in times of distress, which encourages more secure child attachment
- support from relatives
- support from caseworkers.

Worker change is an important factor

Worker change may be one of the factors that also drives placement instability because of disruptions in foster parent and child support. Most importantly, we have growing evidence that change in workers significantly hurts a child's ability to find a permanent home.

Worker change may be one of the factors that also drives placement instability because of disruptions in foster parent and child support

Figure 2 – Fewer changes in caseworkers increases the chances of permanency for children



Note: Data reported represents 679 children who entered care in calendar year 2003 through September 2004 and exited within the same time period. Data reported to review staff by the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare.

Source: Flower, C., McDonald, J., & Sumski, M. (2005). *Review of Turnover in Milwaukee County Private Agency Child Welfare Ongoing Case Management Staff*. Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee County Department of Social Services (Mimeograph).

There are many examples of where poor worker retention has an impact on programme effectiveness.

Dramatic data were released from some private agencies in Milwaukee county in Wisconsin that illustrate how turnover of ongoing case managers does impact permanency for children. For 659 children who entered care from 1 January 2003 through September of 2004 in Milwaukee County, and exited to permanency within the same time period, increases in the number of worker changes lessened the chance of permanency achievement. Children entering care during the time period who had only one worker achieved permanency in 74.5% of the cases. As the number of case managers increased the percentage of children achieving permanency substantially dropped, ranging from 17.5% for children who had two case managers to a low of 0.1% for those children who had six or seven case managers (a design limitation in this study was that the researchers did not control for length of stay in foster care). Potter and Klein-Rothschild (2002) also showed that the fewer workers a child has, the more likely he/she is to be reunified (see figure 2). Staff turnover remains a real problem, and it has major consequences for children and parents.

Conclusion

The effect of multiple placements on child and adult functioning has not been established definitively because some studies have found negative effects while others have not (e.g., Proch & Tabor, 1985). The more recent research in this area, however, is documenting serious negative effects. As this review has illustrated, there are many reasons why child welfare practitioners have been concerned with placement change in out-of-home care for decades, including a long history of research in Great Britain (e.g., Schofield, Thoburn, Howell & Dickens, 2005). The challenge today is implementing proven strategies for increasing placement stability while at the same time helping children achieve permanency in ways that meet their unique cultural and developmental needs. As we learn more about how children achieve in school, learn key life skills, and transition successfully to adulthood, it becomes increasingly clear how difficult it is for children to have enduring positive relationships with one or more adults, as well as connections to birth family and kin.

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Peter J. Pecora, PhD is Senior Director of Research Services with Casey Family Programs and Professor at the School of Social Work, University of Washington.

Danielle Huston, MSW is a Research Assistant with Casey Family Programs.

The authors would specially like to thank John Emerson, Mary Herrick, Debbie Staub, and Jason Williams for their contributions to this literature review, and the foster care alumni and staff who shared their life stories.

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The dynamics of placing children with kin

Children in care in England

Minimising placement change

Children in care in Ireland

Health and education assessments

Launching young people into adult life



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