

Fact Sheet N° 17

A Global Policy for Children and the Family PROVISIONAL PROTECTIVE MEASURES: FAMILY PLACEMENT

Family placement consists of entrusting a child, in principle temporarily, to a person or a family other than his biological father and mother, with or without the consent of the latter (if it is deemed in the interests of the child). The foster family may be part of his/her extended family or a member of the local community. The child shares the life of the foster family, which assumes responsibility for his/her upbringing and education. The child thus placed does not become a legal member of the foster family, but continues to be part of his/her family of origin. Family placement must be a provisional measure geared most of all to the child's reintegration within the family of origin.

Family placement provides a provisional family environment for a child who cannot live permanently in his biological family. The duration of the placement serves as preparation for a family reintegration or an adoption generally by another family. Because of the family nature of it and as a provisional protective measure, this type of placement is preferable to admitting the child to an institution. For example, it makes it possible:

1. to keep the child in his/her family of origin by offering him/her stays, from time to time, in a foster family. this periodic distancing for a short time ensures the child and /or the family moments of respite that make it possible to deflate or resolve family problems.
2. to have the time to prepare the family of origin and the child for family reintegration.
3. to have the time to identify, when needed, a suitable adoptive family for the child.

The length of the placement depends on the child's age. A placement of a year for a child of two means half his/her life!

The major difficulty of family placements is in the coexistence of two families

responsible for the same child: the foster family and the family of origin. This state of affairs must be completely acceptable to the foster family and be closely monitored by the social workers.

The foster family

A foster family must undergo prior evaluation to determine if it is capable of assuming its role. Furthermore, the choice of family must be made carefully. The selection of foster families must be done by professionals: not every family can become a foster family. Criteria for choosing foster families are, for example, their age, availability, physical and mental health, their place of residence, what motivates them, etc. Furthermore, it is important to make the effort to place the child in a family that is able to adapt to the characteristics and the needs of that particular child. Not every family chosen can take just any child in their care.

To the extent possible, it is essential to avoid exposing the child to a succession of different foster families, since he/she will probably no longer be able to build a lasting relationship with the person who eventually adopts him/her. For the child each separation is hard to bear.

Preparation, personal support and evaluation

Once family placement is agreed upon, it is appropriate to prepare the child and give him/her personal support during this important new way of life.

During the child's placement, supervision and personal support for both the foster family and the child are necessary so as to avoid, on the one hand, child abuse or exploitation, and, on the other, to support the family and child whenever necessary. The professionals must maintain their relations with the family of origin and also ensure, in particular, that the family of origin's visits to the child and vice versa run smoothly.

A periodic assessment of the placement should be carried out to determine whether or not this measure should continue or if others should be considered.

In some countries, there are families that specialize in fostering newborn babies for a legal period of reflection, from which the biological mother benefits before giving or confirming her consent to the adoption of her child. Such families are specially trained to assume the role of transition before returning the child to his/her biological mother or between the biological mother and a prospective adoptive family. This occurs as a guarantee of the child's emotional and physical safety.

Family placement and adoption

In certain special cases, one cannot avoid considering family placement for the longer term: for example when the family of origin maintains regular and positive relations with the child without being able

to reintegrate him/her and if it is in the child's interest who also benefits from positive relations with his/her foster family. In some countries, this type of long-term family placement, while maintaining ties with the family of origin, sometimes turns into "open adoption" of the child by the foster family. This option, decided upon by the team of professionals with the agreement of both families, aims at guaranteeing the child and the foster family a legal step that ensures them stability and continuity in their ties, without severing the tie with the family of origin. This option can be particularly useful for adolescents who would have difficulty emotionally accepting full adoption.

Family placement should not be considered for children who meet all the conditions for adoption, when the latter is in their best interests. Nonetheless, it may be used as a transition measure instead of institutionalization, covering the period needed for the adoption proceedings.

Although, in exceptional cases that are justified in the child's best interests, the foster family can become the adoptive family, it is important to understand that family placement cannot be considered by the foster family and by professionals as the waiting room for adoption. Even less as "a trial period with the child" for the foster family before adopting him/her. And even less as a way of adopting, while avoiding the rules that govern adoption in the country.

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For more information:

HERST Beth (Ed.) "Permanency Planning in the Child Welfare System"; Sparrow Lake Alliance, The Canadian Resource Centre on Children and Youth, 75 Albert Street - Suite 209, Ottawa, ON K1P 5E7; 2000, 187pp.

POWELL John Y. (Ed.) "Family-Centered Services in Residential Treatment: New Approaches for Group Care"; The Haworth Press, Inc., 10 Alice Street, Binghamton, NY 13904-1580, USA; 2000, 146pp.

We are interested in your opinion! To tell us your experiences, ask us your questions about the themes addressed in this file, or to send us your suggestions for changes, don't hesitate to write to us at irc-cir@iss-ssi.org. We also invite you to share this file with other interested persons in your country. Thanks in advance!

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