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EDITORIAL

**Permanency planning for children in temporary care**

*Besides preventing the separation of the child from his/her parents, one of today's great challenges for many countries resides in the development, for each child placed in institution or in a foster family, of an individualized plan for permanent and preferably family life.*

Only few States or organisations actively devote their attention to putting in place legislation, structures, social policies, staff training and budgets to ensure that each child in temporary care may be provided with the elaboration of a permanent life plan (see the Documentation Bulletin no 12 and the Editorial of the Monthly Review no 66, [www.iss-ssi.org/Edito.66.eng.pdf](http://www.iss-ssi.org/Edito.66.eng.pdf)). In most countries, institutionalisation of their child continues to be the first, and sometimes the only, solution proposed to mothers and families in difficulty. As a result, a great number of children have as their only future an undetermined stay in an institution with no consideration of their future in the long term.

**Permanent life plans**

The extent of permanency planning is subject to interpretation and has been discussed among practitioners. It is not always easy to decide when a placement measure must be considered as permanent. In any case, *a permanent family plan entails, as a matter of priority, reintegration in the family of origin* (the immediate family or the extended family). *As a next option, adoption (or kafalah in Islamic countries) should in principle be preferred.* Indeed, to really be permanent, family life should ideally coincide

with a child-parents legal link (birth or adoptive relationship), which gives to the child a real stability and feeling of kinship. In that case, domestic adoption should be given preference over inter-country adoption.

Placement with a foster family or in an institution is generally considered temporary, whereas reintegration in the family of origin and adoption are final solutions. *In certain situations, however, placement can constitute the most suitable permanent solution for a child.* Indeed, there will always be children and adolescents with no possible reintegration option in their family of origin and, at the same time too committed towards this family or too marked by their past to be integrated in a new family, or only on a foster care basis, or for whom the professionals, despite their best efforts, do not find a substitute family. Respect for their best interests and their rights implies, at the very least, a permanent life plan in a (preferably family-like) institution well suited to their needs, as well as maintaining ties, if they are constructive, with their family of origin.

Moreover, *in intra-family situations*, adoption by a member of the family, specially when he/she is too close to the child (a grandparent, brother or sister, etc.) can be harmful, since it cuts through the child's genealogical attachments and disrupts his/her family

references, even making the child a stake in a family conflict. In these cases, placement must be preferred to.

### **Some fundamental principles to take into account in elaborating a permanent life plan**

Every child is a unique being. His/her history and the circumstances of his/her life are unique. To determine the most suitable protective measures, one must *take into consideration his/her personal characteristics* (history, age, physical and mental state of health, emotional development, family and friend links, character traits, religion, ethnicity), *and those of his/her family, as well as the specific possible means of protection.*

Responsibility for raising a child and ensuring his/her upbringing is initially incumbent upon his/her parents (art.18 par. 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). The preparation, enforcement and evaluation of a protective measure for a child must be carried out, to the extent possible, with *the participation of his/her father and mother, and respect, as far as possible, his/her convictions and special habits.*

*The best interests of the child also presuppose that he/she has been informed of the plans drawn up for him/her; that he/she has been heard and consulted to the extent of his/her capabilities; that he/she is prepared for whatever change in his/her life, and that such change is subject to a follow-up, at least until it becomes definitive.*

### **Elements of the professional process of elaborating a permanent life plan**

In elaborating a permanent family plan for the child, it is important that *the value of the interdisciplinary approach* be recognized, bringing together the activities of the social services, psychology and the law, which shape a fuller vision of the case and possible ways of proceeding.

The professionals who participate in the protection of the child and in the decisions that concern him must see to it that the work is done in a coordinated fashion so as to *guarantee continuity in the course of the child's life* (and that of the family of origin), avoiding disruption and contradictory decisions that can be very destabilizing for the child and his/her family.

In all cases, *the permanent life plan of the child should not be elaborated too soon after the*

child has been separated from his/her parents. One must indeed take the time beforehand to evaluate in depth the situation. It is also important to take time to envisage, and if in the best interest of the child implement, contacts between the child in care and his/her birth family, then possibly family reintegration, before thinking about alternative permanent measures. *Equally, this period of time should not be too long to avoid that the child concerned stays in an uncertain situation that could affect his/her development.*

The specific difficulty, for professionals, seems to reside in *the evolution of the plans for a child.* The beginning of taking a child into care, presupposes in principle an investment in the family of origin, as to the value of its resources and its limitations. After a set period of time for each case, if the family of origin cannot offer a sufficient development framework for the child, the specialists, in the interests of the child, must change tactics and envisage resorting to a substitute plan. As the different protective solutions (within the family of origin, adoption, possibly foster or residential care) are not necessarily implemented by the same professionals, agencies and authorities, this process must go hand in hand with *well adapted and disciplined coordination.*

The obligation to search for a permanency planning implies that placement, unlike adoption, must be subjected to *"a periodic review of the treatment provided to the child and all other circumstances relevant to his/her placement"* (art. 25 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child). Such review covers all aspects of the child's conditions of life, including his/her access to the outside world, discipline measures and education, as well as the evolution of the situation justifying his/her placement.

Thus *permanency planning is a dynamic process in an adapted timeframe, which must involve all actors concerned, namely the child, his/her parents and a multidisciplinary team of professionals. Permanency planning is an indispensable tool for the provision of the stability that the child needs for the full and harmonious development of his/her personality.*

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