

Permanency: Definition, Measurement, and Outcomes

Prepared by: Barbara Greenberg, Meagan Miller, Robert Flynn,
Erik Michael, & Cynthia Vincent

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This document was prepared by members of the Ontario Looking After Children (OnLAC) project at the University of Ottawa for discussion by the OACAS Child and Youth Caring Council-Community of Practice (CYCC-COP). The OnLAC team created the document to assist members of the CYCC-COP in their task of formulating a useful definition (conceptual or operational) of permanency, which is a necessary prelude to evaluating the outcomes of permanency in the Ontario child welfare system. In particular, the document is a response to Work Plan #2 (2018-2019) of the OACAS Service Excellence Strategic Council, namely, "to examine the Ontario Child Welfare Service Framework 'Meeting the needs of children in Care and Crown wards' outcome #8- Increasing numbers of children are safely reunified permanently with their parent/guardian" (OACAS, 2018b, pg. 1).

The document has four main purposes and parts. First, we provide a survey of definitions of the concept of permanency that are found in the child welfare literature. Second, we examine some of the major outcomes (i.e., correlates rather than consequences) of permanency that emerge from a highly selected sample of high-quality empirical articles. Third, based on research findings, we respond to the work plan objective regarding how to measure permanency and keep children and youth reunited with their family of origin. Fourth, we suggest a potential pilot project in which permanency and its outcomes in Ontario would be evaluated empirically by following a sample of young people who have exited from out-of-home care. This pilot project could potentially lead to a multi-year longitudinal research project in which a relatively large sample of young people who have left care in Ontario would be followed for an extended period in order to understand how they fare in their transitions to young adulthood.

Part 1: Conceptual and Operational Definitions of Permanency

In this section, we describe permanency as defined in the child welfare literature in order to respond to Section 2.1 of the Service Excellence Strategic Council's Work Plan #2 (2018-2019).

The OACAS (2018a) defines *permanency* conceptually as "an enduring family relationship that is safe and meant to last a lifetime; offers the legal rights and social status of a full family membership; the child or youth has a sense of belonging and affiliation to a family/extended family with significant community connections and provides physical, emotional, social, cognitive and spiritual well-being." In the Ontario Child Welfare system, permanency planning must be provided in a way that respects continuity of care and stable relationships within a family and cultural environment. Standard 7 of Ongoing Service Case Management in the Ontario Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services (MCCSS, 2016) calls for Children's Aid Societies in Ontario to recognize that services should be provided that include early assessment, planning, and decision-making to achieve a permanent plan for the child, and this should include the participation of the child and family members. The ultimate goal for children and their families is to be reunified, unless reunification is not the safest and best option. Permanency, as understood by the Ontario child welfare system, includes reunification with parents, legal custody, and adoption.

Freundlich, Avery, Munson, and Gerstenzang's (2006) research defines *permanency* conceptually as "children have the right to a healthy and safe childhood in a nurturing permanent family, or in the closest possible substitute to a family setting" (p. 743). This can happen in one of four ways: family preservation, reunification with family of origin, permanent place with relatives (kinship/guardianship), or adoption.

While a primary permanency goal of the child welfare sector is to reunite children with their families of origin, operational definitions of permanency generally focus on examining and understanding factors associated with child well-being and stability that are connected to permanency, since evidence (e.g., rates of re-entry) suggests that permanent reunification is not always possible. Child welfare researchers acknowledge the emphasis on permanence in a family setting but also the importance of stability in a child's life, including meaningful and enduring relationships with adults (Font, Sattler & Gershoff, 2018a; Salazar, et al., 2018; Walsh, 2015; Strijker, Knorth, & Knot-Dickscheit, 2008; Schofield & Beek, 2005; Allen & Bissell, 2004; Goldsmith, Oppenheim, & Wanlass 2004; Jones, 2004; Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, & Localio, 1995).

Our review of the literature suggests that permanency may be a misleading term or, in some cases, an unattainable goal. As such, much research in child welfare has also focused on well-being and stability for children in care, because a stable environment that supports secure attachments is a key building block for child well-being. Thus, permanency has thus been defined and measured in three main ways: legal permanency, physical permanency, and relational/psychological permanency.

Legal Permanency

Options for legal permanency may include family preservation, foster care, family reunification, adoption, or permanent guardianship. *Legal permanency* includes the laws and guidelines set out by government and the child welfare system for ensuring the safety and planning goals for children and youth in care (Salazar, et al., 2018; Walsh, 2015; Koh, 2010; Tilbury & Osmond, 2006; Barth, 1999). This includes timeframes as well as reasonable efforts required to cope with the administration and implementation of a plan for a child's safe living environment. Legal permanency is associated with the process that shapes social workers', attorneys', and judges' decisions about children in care. Additionally, the legal terms describing how children in care are placed are a part of legal permanence (e.g., legally bound to biological parents, adopted, under the care of a guardian, etc.) (Salazar et al., 2018; McGrath-Lone et al., 2017; Koh, 2010; Freundlich et al., 2006; Barth, 1999; Barth & Barry, 1987).

Physical Permanency

A safe and stable living environment is paramount to a child's well-being. *Physical permanency* in child welfare refers to children and youth having a stable home or shelter, as well as financial security (Walsh, 2015). Placement instability can disrupt school, including relationships with friends, teachers, and mentors, and can also have an impact on relationships with siblings and community (Font et al., 2018a; Tilbury & Osmond, 2006). Research shows that the more placements youth experience while in out-of-home care, the more likely they are to have increased mental and behavioural health problems throughout childhood. This can adversely affect their future well-being and success after they have left the child welfare system (Font et al., 2018a; Tilbury & Osmond, 2006; Anderson, 1997; Rubin et al., 1995). In contrast, Barber & Delfabbro (2003) found that placement instability up to the eighth month that a child is in care had limited impact on well-being. Some instability can thus be tolerable, but too much drifting (i.e., changing from placement to placement, with no plan) is negatively correlated with well-being. Strijker, Knorth, and Knot-Dickscheit (2008) found that children and youths in kinship placements were more likely to experience fewer placement changes, and their overall length of stay in the care system was shorter than that of their peers in foster care.

Relational Permanency

Salazar et al. (2018) define *permanency* as "ensuring that children and youth have meaningful, enduring connections to family or other long-term caring adults" (p. 9). *Relational permanency* is defined as a stable and unconditional emotional connection (Walsh, 2015; Freundlich, 2006).

Research shows that having a stable emotional connection to one or more adults is a protective factor for young people in out-of-home care. Such relationships are positively correlated with youth well-being and other benefits: increased post-secondary educational attainment, having a bank account, reduced risk of homelessness, improved psychological well-being, and improved physical health (Salazar et al., 2018; Tilbury & Osmond, 2006; Freundlich et al., 2006; Wulczyn, 2004; Barth, 1999). Young people with secure attachments have a greater capacity for self-regulation, effective

social interactions, positive self-representation, self-reliance, and adaptive coping skills. These attachments help shape a sense of self, and are key to future relationships (Tilbury & Osmond, 2006; Schofield & Beek, 2005; Goldsmith et al., 2004).

Instability can deprive young people of continuous attachment figures, such that they may have a more difficult time establishing trust and affection with caregivers, compared to those with more stable placement experiences. Young people who remain in the same school can benefit from this stability because they do not experience disruptions to their education and can maintain the relationships they have built with others in school, including peers and adults (Freundlich, 2006; Barth, 1999).

Racial and ethnic identity formation is an important part of development for children from an early age and through adolescence and an essential part of acquiring a healthy sense of self and connection to community (Jones-Harden, 2004). The needs of young people from minority ethnic or racial groups must be considered when planning for permanency. Cunneen and Libesman (2000) examined the importance of paying particular attention to Indigenous children and families in care, given the history that Indigenous families have had with the child welfare system as well as the overrepresentation of Indigenous children and youths in out-of-home care. According to Baidawi, Mendes and Saunders (2017), "Efforts should be made to preserve Indigenous children's family, community and cultural connections when these children have been removed from their parents' care" (p. 732). Baidawi et al. (2017) found that cultural planning was of value when completed. Practitioners and stakeholders endorsed policies and legislation that supported the maintenance of Indigenous people's connection to culture and community.

In the California Permanency for Youth Project, Sanchez (2004) reported that youth rated relational permanency as more important than their legal status in the home. Legal permanency does not guarantee a bond or permanent placement. The California Permanency for Youth Project suggested that permanency is a "state of mind, not a placement" (Walsh, 2015, p. 330). Walsh (2015) found that legal permanence had minimal impact on outcomes for youth who do not feel they have a safe and stable living environment. As such, an exaggerated emphasis on placement when referring to permanency is misguided, as a sense of belonging is developed and nurtured through connections to neighbourhood and community and through relationships at school.

Part 2: Outcomes Associated with Permanency

In this section, we review a small number ($N = 5$) of peer-reviewed published articles (namely, a good review paper and four large-sample and methodologically high-quality studies) to make the point convincingly that the real-world outcomes associated with permanency may, in fact, be considerably less positive than is sometimes assumed. By "outcomes", in the present context, we mean correlates empirically associated with permanency rather than consequences necessarily caused by permanency (or its opposite, instability).

In an article published in the world's top-ranked sociological journal, Font, Berger, Cancian, and Noyes (2018b) noted that child welfare places a high priority on *permanency*, which they defined as

exiting foster care through reunification with family of origin, adoption, or legal guardianship (including permanent placement with kin), in order to promote the healthy development and well-being of foster youths. However, the authors also noted that little empirical evidence exists to suggest that the preferred form of permanency, namely, reunification, is associated with positive outcomes. Font et al. (2018b) studied a large sample of 8,453 former foster youths in Wisconsin who had entered foster care in 2004, when aged 16 or younger, and who were 19 or older in 2015. The researchers used longitudinal data to examine educational attainment and earnings among the young people after they had exited care in one of the four most frequent types of exit: reunification (67% of the study sample), adoption (2%), guardianship or permanent placement with kin (9%), or aging out (22%). They noted that *aging out of care* is not a form of permanency because such youths have no legally or formally recognized family.

Font et al. (2018b) found that youths who had aged out of care (i.e., who had experienced a non-permanency exit option) had odds of graduating from high school and enrolling in college that were similar to those of adopted youths but significantly higher than those of reunified youths or youths who had exited to guardianship/kinship care. Earnings were similar across the groups. Also, the odds of aged-out (but not of reunified) youths of achieving high school graduation and average earnings were higher for youths who had spent more time in foster care prior to age 18. Overall, Font et al. (2018b) interpreted their result as indicating that permanency, by itself, is insufficient to promote foster youths' educational and economic attainment.

In another very recent paper, Font, Sattler, and Gershoff (2018a) examined several major empirical outcomes associated with placement stability, which can be viewed as comparable to permanency and, like the latter, an important priority of the out-of-home care child welfare system. Font et al. (2018a) studied a two-year cohort of children who had entered foster care in Texas. They investigated the degree to which children experienced "progress moves" as outcomes (i.e., moving to a preferred setting, such as living with a sibling or with a relative), versus "non-progress moves" (i.e., moving to a non-preferred, more restrictive, less family-like, or less safe and potentially more abusive setting). Their very large sample consisted of 23,760 children, who experienced, in all, 66,585 placements. The researchers found that of the placements ending with a move to a new placement, 29–43% ended with a progress move, compared with 57–71% ending with a non-progress move. Font et al. (2018a) suggested that consideration of whether a child's placement move would be an improvement to their present situation is of major importance in identifying and addressing the causes of instability. The fact that 29–43% of all moves were progress moves suggested that difficulty existed in the early identification of long-term placements and that there was an overreliance on temporary shelter placements.

Biehal (2007) reviewed UK and US studies of the reunification with their families of children under the age of 16 years who had returned home from placements in care. One of Biehal's (2007) main questions concerned the outcomes of reunification. She interpreted the limited evidence available on the outcomes of reunification, including re-entry into care, re-abuse, and emotional and behavioral results, as justifying caution by service personnel when returning abused or neglected children to their families. She argued that greater attention to assessment, planning, and follow-up support was

required if children were to be successfully reunited with their families. She also advocated more research on the outcomes of reunification.

Connell et al. (2009) investigated the risk of maltreatment in a sample of 3,259 children in Rhode Island who had exited foster care and been reunited with their families. Of the sample, 37% had been placed in foster care because of maltreatment (e.g., neglect, physical abuse, or sexual abuse), versus 63% for other reasons (e.g., child behaviour or parental substance abuse). The objectives were to compare rates of maltreatment following reunification with family of origin for youths in care as a result of maltreatment versus those in care for other reasons, and to assess the effects of child, family, and case characteristics on rates of re-maltreatment among those placed in foster care because of maltreatment.

Connell et al. (2009) found that children placed in foster care because of maltreatment were significantly more likely to be maltreated following reunification. Risk factors associated with re-maltreatment for children who had been in care because of maltreatment included a previous foster care placement, exiting care from a non-kin placement, and removal from the parental home due to neglect. Child neglect was the primary type of recurrent maltreatment that occurred following reunification. The authors concluded that supports are needed for families who are about to be reunited, especially when the child had been removed from the home because of abuse or neglect. Youths with a history of repeated foster care placement or placed with non-relatives were also seen as requiring additional supports. The practice implications of the findings were that services should be delivered to minimize the risk of maltreatment recurrence following reunification, especially for high-risk cases prior to reunification and for the year following reunification.

In England, McGrath-Lone, Deardren, Harron, Nasim, and Gilbert (2017) noted that exiting and then re-entering out-of-home care disrupts permanence and may have long-lasting and negative consequences for children. Based on national administrative data, the authors identified key child and care factors associated with re-entry, knowledge of which they used to create a probability calculator to estimate which groups of children were most likely to re-enter care within three months. McGrath-Lone et al. (2017) discovered that 35.3% of the 4,076 children who had exited care in 2008 re-entered within five years and that rates of re-entry co-varied with youth, ethnic, or care factors. Young people aged 11-15 years were more likely to reenter care than those who were younger; 26.1% of Asian, Black, or Other-ethnicity youths children re-entered care, compared with 37.6% of White or Mixed-ethnicity youths; and previous experience of out-of-home care, group care, or being in care voluntarily was associated with higher rates of re-entry.

This brief survey of research demonstrates that the outcomes associated with permanency may indeed be negative. Thus, for example, aging out may be associated with better educational outcomes than reunification. Many young people in care may experience “non-progress moves” to more restrictive and riskier settings. More assessment, planning, and follow-up may be required to avoid potentially negative outcomes of reunification. Fortunately, research increasingly appears to allow us to identify those young people who are most at risk of re-entering care, such that we may be able to prevent some of it.

Part 3: How to Keep Families Together: Services and Support

In this section, we review the child welfare literature to examine strategies for successful reunification in response to the Strategic Council Work Plan # 2 (2018-2019) objective: “how to increase the number of children who are safely reunified permanently with their families of origin.” We examine two specific issues: (1) barriers to reunification, and (2) factors correlated with keeping families together in response to the question of how to maintain reunification between youths and their families of origin. We invite the groups listed in the Responsibility Assignment Matrix (RASCI Matrix) included in the Strategic Council Work Plan # 2 (2018-2019) to discuss the literature we have reviewed and make suggestions from their professional and personal knowledge bases. These groups included members of the Child and Youth Caring Council-Community of Practice, OACAS, practitioners, CAS workers, Service Excellence Strategic Council, Research, Outcomes and Accountability Strategic Council, Executive Leadership Section–Executive, Indigenous Forum Directors of Service, Q-Net – CPIN, One Vision One Voice Project Equity Focus, and the University of Toronto OCANDS Team.

Barriers to reunification

Many obstacles to permanent reunification with families of origin exist. Agency barriers may impede timely goal planning for permanency, the complexity of process can delay reunification, and adoptive logistics can be lengthy. Systemic factors also keep children from being reunited with their families of origin, including poverty, homelessness, or deteriorating housing (D’Andrade & Nguyen, 2014; Anderson 1997). These factors are obviously difficult for the child welfare system to address, such that providing support for families with these types of barriers needs to be done in conjunction with other governmental organizations in order to aid in the reunification process.

According to research, children with mental, emotional, and learning disorders are less likely to reunite with their families of origin. If they do reunite, they have a higher likelihood of returning to out-of-home care (Landers & Danes, 2016; Biehal, Sinclair, & Wade, 2015). Youths from families with substance abuse and mental health problems (e.g. depression, anxiety), as well as youth admitted to care for abuse and/or neglect, are less likely to be reunified with their families of origin and are more likely to return to out-of-home care (Landers & Danes, 2016; D’Andrade & Nguyen, 2014; Festinger, 1996; Connell et al., 2009; Anderson, 1997).

Murphy, Van Zyl, Collins-Camargo, and Sullivan (2012) found that a lack of adequate services and resources was a barrier to permanency. D’Andrade and Nguyen (2014) found that parents who made full use of specific problem-targeted services (e.g., parenting classes, counseling services) were more likely to be reunified with their children compared with parents who did not complete the use of services. Parents who completed the use of services were no more or less likely to reunify with their children than parents who had no problems/no need for services.

More social support can enhance parenting and positive outcomes. Social support can be a buffer against stress, strengthen parenting, and protect children from possible entry into care and re-entry if services have been accessed in preparation for reunification with family of origin (Rajendran et al., 2015).

Keeping Families Together

Access to services to help parents and families before and after reunification is an important component in keeping families unified (Biehal, Sinclair, & Wade 2015; Connell et al., 2009; Wulczyn, 2004). According to Biehal et al. (2015), reunified children were more likely to have remained with their family of origin six months after returning if planning was purposeful and proactive, they were reunified more slowly, family-focused social work interventions were provided, and parents accessed more services. To ensure reunification is safe and lasting, a focus on providing access to strength-based family services that support, identify, and enhance families to encourage parental involvement, ownership, and compliance with services and case planning is appropriate (Connell et al., 2009, Tilbury & Osmond, 2006). Research also supports the need for ongoing intervention and supports after children leave care in order to prevent reentry (Connell et al., 2009; Wulczyn, 2004).

Concurrent planning is a model of permanency planning used in many child welfare agencies in the US (Tilbury & Osmond, 2006). Concurrent planning sees active work toward reunification with a family of origin, while an alternative plan is simultaneously developed - often adoption. The benefit to concurrent planning is that children can achieve permanency with families more quickly (Monck, Reynolds, Wigfall, 2004). By planning concurrently, time lags associated with sequential planning (that is, waiting for the next step after assessment for the likelihood of reunification has been completed) are shortened (Tilbury & Osmond, 2006).

Access to supports and services is a crucial part of helping families become and remain reunited. Families who use available services, both prior to and after reunification, have a greater likelihood of staying reunified.

Part 4: Potential Pilot and Major Follow-up Studies of Care-Leavers in Ontario

The following section responds to the question in the Strategic Council Work Plan # 2 (2018-2019), "What data elements are required to measure the Outcome 8"? Here, we suggest that a pilot project be conducted in the near future to begin to answer this measurement question. This small-scale study could also prepare the way for a large-scale, multi-year study that would follow up a sizable sample of youths who have exited the child welfare system in Ontario.

Young people in care, caregivers, practitioners, managers, policy makers, and researchers in Ontario currently suffer from a major lack of data and information about the prevalence and intensity of the key outcomes, positive and negative, that accompany permanency in the province. This lack of

systematic knowledge about the outcomes associated with various permanency and non-permanency exit options makes it virtually impossible to identify those young persons and their families who are in particular need of support to increase their chances of successful transitions from care and to reduce their risks of negative outcomes. We thus propose that OACAS approach the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) with a proposal to sponsor a pilot study of young people who leave care in Ontario. The study would evaluate various permanency options and their respective outcomes in the short term and be designed to prepare the way for a long-term applied research project that would follow up, for a decade or more, a large sample of young people who have exited care in the province. Potential funding would be sought from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and other sources. The pilot study and subsequent major study would be modelled on the landmark multi-year project on transitions from carried out over the last 15 years by Courtney et al. (2011) at Chapin Hall and the University of Chicago, *The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth* (Hereafter *The Midwest Evaluation*).

The Midwest Evaluation has followed a large sample of young people from Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois as they have transitioned out of foster care into adulthood. It is a collaborative effort involving Chapin Hall, the University of Chicago, the University of Wisconsin Survey Center, and the public child welfare agencies in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin. *The Midwest Evaluation* provides a comprehensive picture of how foster youth have fared during their transition since the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 became law. Foster youth in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois were eligible to participate in the study if they had entered care before their 16th birthday, were still in care at age 17, and had been removed from home for reasons other than delinquency. Baseline survey data were collected from 732 study participants when they were 17 or 18 years old. Study participants were re-interviewed at ages 19, 21, 23 or 24, and 26. Because many of the questions *Midwest Evaluation* participants were asked were also part of the US National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Courtney et al. (2011) were able to make comparisons between their sample of former foster youths and a nationally representative sample of young people in the general population. These comparisons have indicated that young people who have aged out of foster care have fared relatively poorly compared to their peers in a number of areas, including education, employment, and housing, while suggesting ways in which outcomes could be improved. For example, the *Midwest Evaluation* presented a unique opportunity to compare the educational and other outcomes of young people from Illinois, which allows foster youths to remain in care until their 21st birthday, to the outcomes of young people from Iowa and Wisconsin, where foster youths generally age out when they are 18 years old. The data suggest that providing foster care until age 21 is associated with better educational outcomes, for example.

In conclusion, permanency has been defined and measured, and its outcomes have been evaluated, in many countries, for decades. Researchers agree that permanency is often not permanent and often does not lead to hoped-for good results. In 1987, Barth and Berry wrote that “a ‘permanent’ placement is one that is intended, but not guaranteed, to last forever. Even though the law seeks permanence for children, whether in their own home or with other families, permanence cannot be legislated. Replacement is inevitable in responsible child welfare services” (p.75). Measuring youth well-being and educational attainments after leaving child welfare through a pilot project modeled after *The Midwest Evaluation* in Ontario would be an excellent and practical way to begin to examine permanency

outcomes for children and youths in the child welfare system, an area of study that is currently unexplored. The pilot project could also usher in the large-sample, multi-year project that alone will be able to provide the essential information about permanency and its outcomes that Ontario so urgently needs.

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