

## A. The Emotional Impact of Placement on Family Members

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### *Conceptual Framework*

Families typically experience extreme psychological distress and, often, crisis when children are removed and placed. When out-of-home placement is the only way to assure a child's safety, caseworkers must understand the potentially traumatic outcomes to families, and must work to minimize the negative consequences, particularly if the case goal is reunification of the family.

Most families experience pervasive and painful feelings of loss when their children are removed. Parents may also experience psychological threats to their self-esteem, and to their identity as competent parents. They may lose their sense of purpose and direction, particularly if they have been full-time parents whose daily activities have revolved around their children. Separation usually threatens the family's identity, sense of belonging and togetherness, and feeling of security. Siblings also experience considerable distress. They may believe their sister or brother to be permanently gone, perhaps dead; and they may experience heightened anxiety that they, too, may have to leave their home.

Parents whose children are removed are often subjected to criticism and blame from extended family members, neighbors, and friends. They may lose an acceptable social identity, and the respect and esteem of important others. Strong cultural values about family unity and competent parenting may

exacerbate this loss for many families, particularly if the child is placed with strangers outside of the immediate community.

Finally, removal of the children may reduce the family's income and financial security. When a family's primary source of income is public assistance, the removal of the children often results in a cut in their subsidy. They may have to move, and they may lose other supportive services, such as food stamps, medical care, and day care. A lengthy process of reapplication is often necessary to reinstate these services, and finding appropriate housing may involve long waiting lists. This may result in lengthy delays in reunification.

The multiple threats and losses inherent in child placement often precipitate a clinical crisis for families. When in crisis, family members are often immobilized and emotionally disabled by overwhelming distress. They typically cannot engage in goal-directed or problem-solving activities. They may have difficulty just getting by, much less have the stamina to make the changes necessary to have their children returned. Unresolved crisis can increase families' vulnerability to stress, and can sometimes result in a generally lower level of functioning than the family had prior to the crisis [Parad & Caplan 1965].

Many families served by child welfare agencies have a history of marginal adaptive behavior. They may have psychological and emotional problems, may be in dire poverty, may have substance abuse problems, and may have limited coping ability. Some parents have had consistently painful experiences in their interpersonal relationships, and in contacts with social institutions, and they may not trust the agency or the caseworker. They may have limited sources of emotional support. Negative life experiences may also contribute to a general

perception of futility and helplessness, and some families may be without hope that their children will ever be returned. This is exacerbated by the serious, sometimes permanent damage that separation inflicts on the parent-child relationship. Families may give up, withdraw from agency contact, grieve their loss, and resign themselves to life without their children. This seriously compromises the likelihood of successful reunification.

The outcomes of placement for the family may depend largely upon the caseworker's success in engaging and empowering them before and throughout the placement. The degree of loss and threat experienced by family members can be minimized through appropriate casework interventions. By involving parents in planning for their children, and by empowering them during all parts of the placement process, we achieve several objectives: we can maintain and strengthen the relationship between the parents and the child; we can develop and strengthen the parents' parenting skills; we can help the parents work to create a safe home environment for their children; and, in doing the above, we can reduce the traumatic effects of placement for families and children. This can promote reunification, or can provide the worker with essential information with which to conclude the child cannot go home, thus enabling workers to direct their efforts toward placing the child in an alternative permanent family.

## *Application*

### Behavioral Expressions of Grief and Loss in Parents

Certain behaviors typify family members' responses to the losses and threats experienced during placement. If a worker does not properly interpret the meaning of these behaviors, and fails to recognize them as symptoms of grief and stress, the worker may respond in nonproductive ways. For example, the stunned immobilization of a parent in shock could be misinterpreted as a lack of motivation, or as agreement with the placement. Depressive withdrawal could be misinterpreted as a lack of desire to work with the agency toward reunification, or disinterest in the child. Rather than responding with understanding and support, the caseworker might respond in an authoritarian or demanding manner, or may withdraw from contact with family members.

There are many differences in peoples' expressions of loss and grief. However, many behavioral responses to the placement of children are expectable and can be interpreted as normal manifestations of the stages of grieving [Kubler-Ross 1972; Fahlberg 1979]. The following outlines some of the behaviors that may be seen in family members in response to placement of their children. The stages are useful in understanding some of the visual indicators of grief, but grieving is generally complicated and cyclical, rather than a step-like progression through a series of clearly articulated stages.

### Shock or Denial

- Parents may exhibit a robot-like, stunned response at the move. They may be immobilized. A characteristic response of people in emotional shock is, "This can't be really happening!"

- Parents may be very compliant, and may express little emotion or affect. They may appear bland, uncaring, or uninvolved.
- Parents may deny that there is a problem, or deny that the agency can remove the children. They may insist the children will be home in a day or so, or that, "No court will ever give you custody."
- Parents may avoid the caseworker and deny the need to be involved with the agency.
- Some parents who do not have close attachments to their children may not exhibit strong emotional reactions when their children are removed from them. These parents may have abandoned their children or left them in the care of others for long periods of time in the past. The caseworker should assess the parents' reactions over a period of time to differentiate the immobility typical of the shock stage from the emotional remoteness of parents who lack a strong attachment to their child. Parents in shock will move within a few hours or days to expressing anger and pain. Parents without close attachments often do not.

### Anger

- Parents may threaten court action or may directly threaten the caseworker. They may contact an attorney to fight the agency.
- Parents may behave in a contrary and oppositional manner by refusing to let the caseworker visit the home, or by refusing to talk with the worker.

- Parents may refuse to participate with the worker to develop a case plan or to make decisions about the child's welfare.
- Parents may become demanding, sometimes making irrational demands on the worker or the agency.
- Parents may blame the agency, the caseworker, the court, the system, the complainant, or others, for the existence of the problem. They may vehemently reject any need to change.

### Bargaining

- Parents may become semi-responsive to the caseworker and may behave more compliantly.
- Parents may make broad promises, such as, "It will never happen again," "I'll ask my boyfriend to leave," "If I go to all my parenting classes, will I get my children back?"

### Depression

- Parents may "forget" or miss appointments with caseworkers, or may fail to attend scheduled visits with the children.
- Parents may exhibit little initiative or follow-through in visitation, or in other activities designed to promote reunification.

- Parents may display futility and a loss of hope that their children will ever be returned home. Some parents even move away or disappear, and the agency loses contact with them.

### Resolution

- Parents may emotionally begin to restructure their lives without their children. This is not desirable if ultimately the case plan is reunification of the child with the family.
- Parents may move away without notifying the agency, may become involved in new relationships, may have other children, or otherwise "get on with life."
- Parents may not respond to their caseworker's attempts to work with them.
- Parents may stop visiting with their children.
- Parents may not protest court action for permanent custody, and may not attend permanent custody court hearings.

Clearly, our goal is to support family members and employ strategies that maintain the family's integrity, and their connectedness with their children, while the children are in placement. This reduces the losses and threats experienced by the family, reduces the trauma of separation, and subsequently prevents the need to grieve. The extent to which family members experience

placement as a loss depends largely on the caseworker's ability to keep them actively involved with and invested in the well being their child, and involved in collaborative reunification or permanency planning while their child is in placement.

This also implies that we must actively engage families of children currently in placement as quickly as we are able. We will likely have to deal with anger and hostility, depression, and sorrow. However, this is preferable to allowing the grief to be fully resolved. Once parents have psychologically moved on, it becomes increasingly difficult to reengage them.

Strategies to engage and empower parents to remain actively involved with their children in placement are more fully discussed in Section VIII-B, "Empowering Parents to Participate in Placement Activities."