**Permanence for looked after children**

One of the aims of the CELCIS Permanence and Care Team (PaCT) is to promote a common understanding of the concept of permanence and permanence planning across Scotland. To date there is no single universally agreed definition of permanence. As Schofield and colleagues (2012: 244) explain:

“The goal of permanence for children separated from their birth families and in the care of the state has dominated child care policy in the UK, the USA and Canada since the 1980s, but the meanings of permanence in terms of stability, emotional security and family membership into adulthood are complex and the placements and legal status thought best able to achieve permanence are contested.” (244)

In this paper we provide a short definition of permanence in order to clarify the PaCT’s position within these debates. A more comprehensive review of the concept of permanence will be provided in a literature review to be published by PacT later in the year.

**What is permanence and permanence planning?**

The concept of ‘permanence’ for looked after children came into prominence in the 1970’s and 1980’s following concerns that looked after children were drifting in care without a clear plan or purposive action being taken to help them (Tilbury and Osmond, 2006, Schofield et al., 2012).

Various authors have noted that permanence includes a number of elements. For example, Emlen (1977 in nrcpfc.org) suggested four elements of permanence planning: intend (the home is intend to last indefinitely); commitment and continuity (the family is committed to the child, makes assumptions of a common future, and provides continuity in the child’s relationships with caretakers and other family members); legal status (definite legal status established) and social status (the family provides the child with a respected social status). Permanence for looked after children occupies multiple dimensions – time (long-term, for life), space (types of placement), relational (family membership, belonging) and theoretical (attachment, child development). Often, the time and space dimensions have been at the forefront of definitions of permanence.

Permanence practice includes planning how best to stabilise families before care is needed. Permanence planning aims to support children’s reunification with their families following an episode of care. When this is not possible its aim becomes to ensure that children have a secure stable and loving family (Schofield et al., 2012). In the UK, adoption and long-term foster care have historically been the preferred options to permanence when reunification with birth family is not possible (Schofield et al., 2012).

Permanence for looked after children is not, however, simply about the type of placement. It is also, and perhaps more importantly, about the continuity and stability of relationships, the quality of care provided to children and a commitment to offering

‘family’ membership (Tilbury and Osmond, 2006, Munro and Hardy, 2006). Family being understood here in its broadest term to include any individual, group or institution committed to foster an enduring relationship with the child; and where there is reciprocity of emotional investment and entitlement. Additionally, good quality care and family membership should be underpinned by legal security.

It is this understanding of permanence that focuses on the quality of care provided to children and the commitment to offer ‘family’ membership in all care settings that we aim to promote.

**References**

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