

Child Placement Is a Safety Response

Introduction

Foster care has a long-standing tradition as being a specialized program in child welfare just like CPS. Agencies have organized themselves so that foster care is designated as an activity separate from CPS often with specialized caseworkers. In such instances, foster care caseworkers view their responsibilities as unique and different from CPS intervention and its objectives. The fact is that foster care as a part of general child welfare predates CPS by decades. You see, Child Protective Services as compared to Child Welfare Services really is a label and invention that began to emerge in the early 1970s.

Through the years, children have entered foster care for many reasons some of which have had little to do with threats to child safety. Even today children enter foster care for more general child welfare reasons including child mental and physical health problems, adoption related influences, poverty and court ordered placement (as in placement of youth offenders.) The literature indicates that often the reason for placement is rather elusive. It may have as much to do with parent cooperation as it does with any other reason. For our part, however, we think that staff placing children believe that safety is involved.

In today's CPS world, which is consumed with effectively addressing child safety, we are challenged to reform and/or update our perception of child placement and foster care. When children are placed because of threats to their safety, substitute care must be thought of as a supportive CPS response and therefore an integrated part of CPS. When children are placed because of threats to their safety, substitute care – foster care must be thought of as a safety response and, therefore, part of a safety plan.

Formal safety plans as we now know them came into being within the past fifteen years. Prior to that CPS protection of children involved only child placement. Even today as an enduring practice, child placement often is seen as the unilateral response that should occur once a child is determined to be unsafe.

Child Placement Is a Safety Response

The purpose of safety intervention is to control or manage dangerous behaviors, situations, perceptions, emotions and intentions that threaten a child's safety rather than changing the causes of such conditions.

A safety plan is a written arrangement between a family and CPS that establishes how impending danger will be managed. The safety plan must be implemented and active as long as threats to a child's safety exist and caregiver protective capacities are insufficient to assure a child is protected.

A safety plan is not qualified by the location of a child. In some places (either formally or informally) workers sometimes think that a safety plan refers to what is done to protect a child when the child remains home. In other words, a safety plan is only a safety plan if it is an in-home safety plan. This sort of practice means that child placement is considered a protective strategy that is not a safety plan. Well, of course, this is nonsense. It also leads to perpetuating foster care as a function separate from CPS intervention and its objectives. Arguably it contributes to children remaining in care longer than necessary because foster care placement traditionally has not been based on the provisional status of safety planning. In safety plans the management objective is to always seek the least intrusive methods, to view the protection strategy as flexible and modifiable based on what is happening in the family, and to constantly work with the family toward increased caregiver involvement and responsibility to resume the protective role.

Safety intervention is best when it is layered or multifaceted. This rules out decision making and practice that is diametric as evidenced in such thinking as if a child is safe he stays home; if a child is unsafe he is placed. While we are making progress with regard to such thinking, a similar dichotomy is at play – if a child is unsafe use an in-home plan or an out-of-home plan. What about a layered or multifaceted safety plan that involves combinations and options of intervention: some in home responses blended with some out of home options enhanced by creative scheduling and time designations?

Once we rule out general child welfare use for child placement, there remains only one reason to place children – a threat to safety. Therefore the purpose a placement (whether the only safety response option or one that is part of a layered scheme) is to control or manage dangerous family behavior, situations, perceptions, emotions and intent. Its purpose is not to change the causes of those family circumstances. So, the purpose of child placement is the same as the purpose of safety intervention.

Child placement as a safety response option can be articulated within a written agreement between a family and CPS or a court order so that the temporary separation of the child from the family as achieved by the placement establishes how impending danger will be managed. The child placement can remain in effect as a single safety response or as part of a layered approach for as brief or as long as threats to safety exist and caregiver capacities are insufficient to assure a child is protected. Now we have established that child placement as a safety response can be considered in the exact same terms as the definition for a safety plan.

Child Placement as Part of a Safety Plan

The National Resource Center on Child Maltreatment wrote in its publication *Designing a Comprehensive Approach to Child Safety* that effective safety management must provide for a continuum of safety response alternatives from

least to most intrusive. Once CPS identifies threats to safety, a sequence of safety management responses can be taken into consideration. The intervention selection sequence includes various arrangements of which child placement may be included. We consider here those most associated with child placement:

- In home and/or out of home (partial to total)

This may include the use of a safety plan that involves only in home safety services or responses. It could include child placement as the only safety service or response in a safety plan. It could include a safety plan that combines some in home safety services or responses with child placement. Keep in mind that out of home and child placement are not necessarily the same things. So it could include out of home options that are brief in time, focused and limited in scope such as a two hour babysitting arrangement on Saturday afternoons.

- Kinds of placements

Safety plans can include all kinds of placements deployed in creative ways in terms of type of provider, nature of setting, length of time out of the child's own home, intent and value, etc. While it may not be practical it is possible that different kinds of placements could be arranged within one safety plan. For instance, a child may stay in foster care on weekends and with kin during week evenings.

- Parental access to child (none to extensive)

A safety plan that includes a child placement option also considers parent involvement. A less intrusive approach would seek to include parents in meaningful and abundant ways with respect to seeing a placed child; cooperating with the placement family concerning care and decisions;

progressive visitation plans that involve specific expectations concerned with caregiver protective capacities.

- Separation (temporary to permanent)

Separation as a safety response is broader than child placement. Fundamentally it is an objective seen as necessary in some safety plans – to separate the child from the threat. Separation can involve day care, various child activities that gets a child out of the home, occasional or daily care of a child by someone outside the home, crisis or respite care, child placement occurring over weekends or intermittently as in a couple of weeks a month and regular kin or foster care but time designated based on family conditions. So, here we emphasize that kin and foster care within a safety plan should include some determination of the anticipated duration such as two weeks, a month, two months, three months and so on. The reference to permanent obviously refers to the safety response that becomes necessary as a permanency concern after caregivers show no willingness or capacity to make necessary adjustments to resume their protective responsibilities.

Child Placement within the Safety Plan Structure

A safety plan must contain certain ingredients in order to meet the purpose and definitions we've been considering in this article. Here we demonstrate to you how child placement exists within the safety plan as a written arrangement with the family. A safety plan must include:

- Identification of the person (by name, location, phone, etc.) providing the safety response.

Layered or multifaceted safety plans must identify every person contributing. That includes the placement provider. If child placement is the single option within the safety plan the provider is identified.

- A specification of exactly what the safety response, activity, service, etc. is.

This is an area that caseworkers are readily accepting concerning in home safety plans. We are not witnessing the “fleshing” out of a specification for exactly what the child placement service is in terms of nature of the response, activity, service expectations and other things such as parent access, designation of time.

- The level of effort expected: when the response is to occur, the length of the response each time it occurs, how often the response will occur and an estimation of how long the response will remain in place.

Like the specification of safety services this also generally is left as assumed when child placement is included in a safety plan. Think in your own practice whether decisions are made that set the boundaries and limits on the child placement arrangement.

- Assurances that the provider is suitable, available and accessible.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act requires that a child’s safety within a placement be a constant concern. This begins with a judgment about the suitability, availability and accessibility of the placement provider. The same standard that might apply to evaluating the suitability of a community service provider serving in an in home safety plan should be applied to a placement provider. In addition, be advised that foster care licensing is not sufficient to meet this expectation. The assurance required here must be currently established when a child is placed; in

accordance with the specific child being placed; and in conjunction with the placement home situation that exists at the time of placement.

What may be an unusual practice with regard to establishing the suitability of placement providers is acquiring their stated awareness and acknowledgement of their role and responsibility in participating in a safety plan – in their purpose as being fundamentally about assuring safety management. Here we do not minimize the necessary care for a child's well being that is expected of foster parents; but we emphasize the primary reason for the child being placed is safety.

- A statement about how safety responses will control threats to child safety.

When child placement is used as the option to protect a child somehow the field has not moved along far enough to include the routine practice of justifying why child placement is included as part of a safety plan and how it controls threats to safety. Well, you might ask, isn't it obvious? If child placement practice results in constant separation from the threat or its source then perhaps this sort of clarification and statement is not necessary. However, if child placement is viewed as an option that can exist as part of a versatile layered safety plan that also includes expectations about progressive involvement and responsibility of parents, it is important to account for how child placement as a safety response contributes to controlling threats.

- Child's caregiver acknowledgment of and agreement with the plan.

Safety plans of any kind should involve a child's parents or caregivers in so far as possible and appropriate. This includes factoring in how parents understand and accept a safety plan that may involve limited or significant separation using child placement. The acknowledgement and

agreement (or non-agreement) must include the certainty that the detail that is described here is available and explained to parents. When children are placed that absolutely should include a clear and understandable statement of the conditions of the placement and the conditions for the child's return home. That is a subject we will address in an upcoming article.

- An indication of how the plan will be overseen and managed.

CPS has an obligation within each safety plan it creates to state how the safety plan will be managed. When child placement is part of a safety plan then both policy standards governing child placement management and expectations that are appropriate for an individual case should be stated. This means within more comprehensive type safety plans that include combinations of in home and out of home safety response options CPS is obligated to state how oversight will assure that all options are routinely taken into account.

Conclusions

As safety intervention continues to evolve in CPS it will be important that child placement becomes accepted as one of many possible safety response options. That will require the field to discontinue viewing substitute care related to protection as a freestanding program separate from CPS. It will require acceptance of foster care as a support service primarily concerned with assuring child safety and serving as the substitute for the parent's diminished protective capacities. When this happens it will be time to question how agencies design their CPS and foster care programs, how staff are organized and assigned work, how staff perceive themselves and whether CPS intervention will be an integrated concern. When that day comes we will see the dismissal of unilateral use of child placement when kids aren't safe; we'll see a change from diametric thinking and responses that considers safety plans for children remaining in home and out of

home placement as something of its own making. Finally we think that we will also find that no more will in home safety plans be documented on one format and out of home safety plans documented differently or not at all but rather relying on standardized substitute care documentation requirements.