

Appendix 1: Factors that Influence Placement Stability

Placement stability: How to help identify the positive factors and risk factors to avoid placement change where this is unplanned

Stability of placement is associated with better outcomes for looked after children. It is achieved by providing an environment where the child is securely attached to one (or more) main carer who provides a safe, consistent and effective environment where the child feels emotionally secure for the duration of the placement and into adulthood.

There are lots of variables as to why placements breakdown or change. There is no one reason. The lists detailed below have been collated by looking at the common themes that may indicate placement instability, extracted from research and evidence-based practice in the last 10 years.

The focus will be on practical advice to assist social workers, carers and supervising social workers. There are other institutional factors i.e. bureaucracy / poor data entry/ lack of resources, and so on, which influence stability and these must also be taken into account.

Placement stability will give a child the confidence to progress and grow; to have the ability to put down roots and form secure attachments.

Structural factors that promote placement stability

- A robust organisational framework and support structure for foster carers;
- Recognition of the challenging task of fostering and treating carers as partners;
- A continuing drive both for qualified social workers and for carers;
- Promoting diversity in foster care; recognition of child's ethnicity and cultural needs being met etc;

The positive factors that help promote placement stability:

- The child is able to form positive attachments: he/she has a sense of security and positive wellbeing;
- The carer and child have a sense of emotional containment: (i.e. carer does not feel the child is "out of control" or running the family into the ground). The carer and child can resolve their differences; have a sense of love; have appropriate responses to each other;
- The carer likes the child; the carer demonstrates good parenting; the carers' expectations for the child are realistic; they accept the child for who they are; (*See list below)
- The child likes the placement;
- The child, carer and Children and Families have a good relationship with the birth family. There is continuity in the child's relationships. Contact works well;
- There is recognition by the school/educational establishment that the child has (special) needs and the school is prepared to meet those needs and support the foster placement.
- The placement is with relatives and is supported by the family;
- The carer feels valued and is supported. In many placements the presence of a second carer in the house will be a positive attribute for the placement;
- There is evidence to suggest that where appropriate, placing siblings together promotes placement stability.

Carers providing the greatest stability are felt to:

- Enjoy being with children;
- Be family-centred;
- Be flexible but firm;
- Be emotionally resilient;
- Communicate openly and honestly;
- Be amenable to outside support;
- Demonstrate stability.

Gillian Schofield's research, although old, also lists a number of positive and still valid characteristics of carers which include:

- Sensitivity towards the child; responding to the emotional age of the child
 - sensitivity and proactive parenting around the birth family and issues of contact
 - active parenting regarding education, activities and life skills
 - firm supervision
 - clear boundaries
 - promoting autonomy and "enjoying a challenge"
- ("Stability in foster care" Dr. G. Schofield. The research overview. Jan 2003).

The risk factors and possible predictors of placement breakdown

The following are drawn from research and evidence-based practice:

- Lack of social work support/ case unallocated;
- Placement was unplanned; carer not properly advised of the child's needs and not prepared for the challenges/difficulties;
- The care planning was poor and the child's needs were not assessed adequately to identify appropriate resources to support the placement. Poor care planning (delay in removing from home/removing from home too soon/no contingency plan or a failure to form a long term view of the child's needs) can lead to drift and instability;
- There was no opportunity to match the child to the carer;
- The child has a history of abuse and neglect and has emotional and behavioural difficulties, particularly attachment problems;
- The age of the child (younger children are more likely to settle). Older children (age 9-15) may have stronger attachments to home and be more damaged by past experiences and therefore be unable to make new relationships. A child aged over ten years entering the care system for the first time, is significantly less likely to be able to settle than a younger child;
- The child expresses a consistent dislike of the placement. The child is unable to settle at home or in school; children with particularly strong attachments to their birth family, who have an absolute belief that they will return home;
- Where the contact arrangements are fraught or unresolved; there are poor relationships between birth family and carer/Children and Families. Where the child considers he/she does not have enough contact and where distance from home prevents more frequent contact. Contact has been associated with stability in a number of research studies, however the presumption of contact does not necessarily mean more is better. It can also contribute to instability;

- The carer dislikes the child/ is rejecting. The carer may be concerned that the presence of the foster child is impacting on their own family/children; or the carer is stressed by other life events; or that the carer associates the child with other problems such as an allegation or previous disruption. (This is where the management of an allegation or disruption is so critical);
- Young people (age 16 plus) who move to independent living prematurely, or without adequate preparation;
- The child's education is disrupted. Education and stability go hand in hand. The success of one can depend on the other. A child excluded from school, even for short periods, puts great pressure on the foster placement and carer;
- Children in long-term placements whose changing needs are not recognised.

The changing needs of older children in long term placements are not always recognised. As a young person moves into adolescence their needs and behaviour change and they may begin to challenge the carers' authority. In some cases where the placement subsequently disrupts, evidence emerges of a widening gap between the carer's and child's perception of the placement. It also reminds us that we ought to take time out to listen to the views of children and young people.

It remains essential that where a placement becomes permanent or long-term, the carers' ability to meet the needs of the growing child is fully re-assessed to protect both the child and the carers.

Some suggestions/ solutions for maintaining placement stability

There is no substitute for good care planning, preceded by a clear assessment of the child's needs. This may include specialist assessments (preferably before the child is placed as opposed to some months after).

An assessment of the child will be ongoing and can develop throughout the child's care history. The records on the child help to monitor the child's progress, and should be reviewed at every Me and My World review.

Matching the child to the most appropriate carer is still a priority in promoting placement stability, as is support to the carer, and matching resources to needs.

The carer should be well informed of the child's needs and contact arrangements with the birth family prior to the placement.

The child needs to be prepared for any move into or from a placement. This is particularly pertinent for 15+ young people moving towards independence. The child should be advised of his/her care plan and understand the reasons for being placed with the carer.

Social work practice will have an influence on stability. Research notes that where the worker demonstrates the following, the placement is more likely to be sustainable:

- Sensitivity to child and carer's needs
- effective advocacy on behalf of the child, [particularly in relation to school]
- professionalism
- mutual trust between all parties
- ongoing support.

Access to therapeutic resources (attachment and trauma informed) is essential not only to support the child but also to advise and support the carer(s).