

# **Achieving Permanency for Children in Kinship Foster Care: A Training Manual**

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***Faith Johnson Bonecutter and James P. Gleeson***

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1992, the Adoption Opportunities Program of the U.S. Children's Bureau issued a request for proposals for research and demonstration projects designed to improve the chances that children in foster care placements with relatives would exit the child welfare system to safe, permanent homes. Prior research suggested that children placed with relatives were less likely to return home to their biological parents or to be adopted than children in foster care placements with non-related foster parents. Three projects were funded, one in New York, one in Michigan, and one in Illinois. The initial version of this training manual was developed by the Illinois project.

This introductory chapter summarizes the purposes and design of the *Achieving Permanency for Children in Kinship Foster Care* project, provides an overview of the training manual and the training videotapes that accompany it, and makes suggestions for using the manual and videotapes. This introductory chapter is followed by six learning units that focus on development of knowledge and skills in facilitating permanency for children in kinship foster care.

### **The Illinois Project: Achieving Permanency for Children in Kinship Foster Care**

The purpose of the Illinois project was to develop and test a practice model designed to improve the "permanency outcomes" for children placed in foster care with relatives. Several different terms are used across the country to describe placement of children in state custody with relatives: "relative foster care," "home of relative care," and most commonly "kinship care." In this manual, we refer to this type of placement as "kinship

foster care," a term used by Berrick, Barth, and Needell<sup>1</sup> to distinguish children placed with relatives through the child welfare system's foster care program from the large numbers of children living with relatives through informal kinship care arrangements.

The Illinois project attempted to develop and test a practice model that would improve the chances that children in kinship foster care would exit custody of the child welfare system through:

- ! safe return to biological parents;
- ! adoption by relatives currently acting as foster parents;
- ! adoption by other family members;
- ! transfer of legal guardianship to a relative; or
- ! adoption by non-relatives.

## Design of the Study

The Illinois project had three phases and worked with two demonstration sites. The two sites are voluntary agencies that serve children in kinship foster care in Cook County, Illinois through purchase of service contracts with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. Staff in the demonstration sites served kinship foster care cases exclusively. The children selected for this study had been in state custody for at least one year. These children were living with relatives approved as "relative foster parents" in Illinois. The related caregivers received the same financial subsidy as received by traditional foster parents.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Berrick, J. D., Barth, R. P. & Needell, B. (1994). A comparison of kinship foster homes and foster family homes: Implications for kinship care as family preservation. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 16(1/2), 35-63.

<sup>2</sup>In Illinois, prior to July 1, 1995, all relatives caring for children in state custody received the same foster care payments as traditional foster parents and were expected to meet "home of relative" approval standards. Foster care payments began with the child's placement with the relative under state custody and continued unless approval was formally denied and the child was removed from the relative's care. The "Home of Relative Reform Plan" took effect July 1, 1995, eliminating separate home of relative approval standards, requiring relatives to meet traditional foster home licensing standards before foster care payments could be received, and creating a reimbursement level for unlicensed relatives at the state standard of need, higher than the AFDC child only payment but lower than the foster care payment (IDCFS. *Illinois HMR Reform Plan*, February 27, 1995).

First Phase (1992-1993): The purposes of the first phase of the project were to define current practice in kinship foster care, identify barriers to permanence as well as conditions that promote permanence, and identify practice principles and methods that have the likelihood of facilitating permanence for children in kinship foster care. In-depth interviews were conducted with 41 caseworkers regarding casework practice on behalf of 77 children in kinship foster care and their families. The 77 children were chosen through a modified random sampling process and represented 9% of all kinship care cases in the two demonstration sites at the time the sample was drawn. Two family cases were randomly selected from each caseworker's caseload. One eligible child was randomly selected from each of these families. Interviews focused on the individual children, their immediate and extended family systems, and casework practice with and on behalf of these children and their families. Interviews averaged two hours per case and were completed between March and May of 1993. During the same period, in-depth interviews, also averaging two hours in length, were conducted with 11 supervisors regarding casework and supervisory practice in kinship foster care. The final method employed in the first phase was a review of 12 kinship care cases by a steering committee of persons with expertise in a wide variety of areas in social work and child welfare. The results of the interviews and case reviews led to the identification of practice principles and methods for facilitating permanence for children in kinship foster care.

Second Phase (1993-1994): In the second phase, the practice principles and methods were incorporated into a draft training curriculum. Caseworkers in demonstration units participated in four half-day training sessions and three to five half-day follow-up consultations that focused on the identified practice principles and methods for facilitating permanence for children in kinship foster care. The training and consultation sessions were conducted by project staff in conjunction with agency supervisors heading each demonstration unit. Caseworkers were asked to implement the specific practice principles and methods and to help project staff and supervisors identify barriers to

implementation of the practice principles and methods. Project staff provided ongoing monthly consultation to supervisors to assist them in their efforts to facilitate their supervisees' implementation of the practice principles and methods. These consultations were also helpful in providing feedback to project staff, assisting them in refining the practice principles and methods for facilitating permanency for children in kinship foster care. During the second phase, project staff also monitored the practice of caseworkers in demonstration and comparison teams through case record reviews, to determine if the practice principles and methods were more likely to be implemented in the six months following training compared to the six months preceding training.

Third Phase and Beyond (1994-1996): Evaluation of the implementation of principles and methods and the effectiveness of the project in facilitating permanency for children in kinship foster care was completed during the final phase of the project. Revisions of this manual were completed during the final phase of this project and a subsequent curriculum development and training project funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

## **The Practice Model: Practice Principles and Methods**

Findings of the first phase of the project suggest that permanency planning for children in kinship foster care is dominated by the formal social service system's service providers with little involvement of persons in the child's kinship network. Although members of the child's kinship network will have the long-term responsibility of ensuring protection, permanence, and well-being for the child if the child is reunified with a parent, adopted by a relative, or a relative assumes legal guardianship, these persons may be excluded from case decision-making when the child is involved with the formal child welfare system. Practice principles and methods incorporated into the training curriculum are intended to

correct the imbalance between the formal and informal systems in decision-making regarding the permanency, protection, and well-being of children in kinship foster care (Figure 1). These practice principles and methods are clustered into four major areas: (1) a broader view of family, (2) ongoing striving for cultural competence, (3) collaboration in decision-making, and (4) building the case-management capacities of kinship networks to support permanent plans. Taken as a whole, these practice principles and methods assist caseworkers in using the resources of the formal child welfare system to strengthen and support, rather than replace, the informal kinship network. These practice principles and methods help the caseworker engage members of the child's kinship system in decision-making on behalf of the child. They help caseworkers engage families from diverse cultural backgrounds and assist caseworkers in combining a sense of urgency regarding permanency planning with a long-term view of child rearing that extends several years beyond the child's exit from state custody.

## Figure 1: Practice Principles and Methods

- ! A broad view of family
  - C going beyond the child, caregiver, parent constellation
  - C identification of members of the child(ren)'s kinship network
  - C facilitating building or strengthening of the kinship network around the goals of protection, permanency, and well-being of the child(ren)
  - C tools: genogram, eco-map
  
- ! Ongoing striving for cultural competence
  - C self-awareness
  - C valuing diversity
  - C knowledge of cultural strengths and natural helping traditions
  - C recognition of the enduring nature of family (emotional) ties
  - C knowledge and use of formal and informal systems of support
  
- ! Collaboration in decision-making
  - C convening relevant members of the kinship network
  - C engaging the kinship network in a plan to ensure the child's protection/safety and well-being
  - C facilitating the family's definition of permanence
  - C facilitating the family's (re)definition of relationships
  - C use of principles of "successful" permanency planning and family preservation projects
  
- ! Building the case management capacities of kinship networks
  - C using a long-term view of child rearing
  - C supporting permanent plans
  - C building the network's skills to anticipate needs and access to services in the future, and to ensure that other needs of the child(ren) and family are met

## Overview of the Training Manual

The titles and highlights of the six learning units are listed in figure 2. The practice principles and methods summarized in figure 1 are incorporated throughout the six learning units that organize the training manual. The *broad view of family* is emphasized most strongly in Unit I. Unit II builds upon the broad view of family and emphasizes an *ongoing striving for cultural competence*. Unit III builds on the content of the first two units by discussing the impact of substance abuse on family systems, broadly defined. Unit III also presents substance abuse as a threat to the cultural strengths and natural helping traditions that are common to many cultural groups. Units IV and V emphasize *collaboration in decision making* through the development of skills in convening key members of the kinship system and engaging them in decisions regarding the safety, permanency, and well-being of the child. Units IV and V help caseworkers to use the broad view of family and their knowledge of cultural strengths to identify and engage these key persons in the decision making process. Unit VI emphasizes *building the case management capacities of kinship networks* to support permanent plans, incorporating the broad view of family, ongoing striving for cultural competence, and collaboration in decision making.

Each unit contains the following:

- ! an overview and goals of the unit;
- ! a discussion section that may be presented as a lecture, duplicated and distributed as a reading to be completed prior to group training or a supervisory conference, or used for self-directed learning;
- ! a list of references cited in each unit;
- ! learning activities and resources to be used in group training, supervisory sessions, as homework assignments, or in self-directed learning; and

- ! full page handouts that may be duplicated and distributed or used to make overhead transparencies.

## **Figure 2: Training Curriculum Outline and Overview of the Units**

### **Unit I The Context of Practice in Kinship Care: Formal and Informal System Constraints and Opportunities**

- ! history of kinship care policy development
- ! ecological and family systems perspective: a broader view of family
- ! characteristics of the formal and informal systems of helping
- ! genograms and eco-maps as tools for information gathering, engagement, assessment and planning

### **Unit II The Sociocultural Contexts of Kinship Care**

- ! self awareness as a necessary skill for effective practice
- ! ongoing striving for cultural competence
- ! identifying and assessing cultural strengths and natural helping traditions
- ! assessing the leadership, balance, and harmony of systems across cultures

### **Unit III Substance Abuse and its Impact on Family Systems**

- ! understanding the impact of substance abuse on the individual and the kinship system including the compelling nature of addiction, the difficulty of recovery and patterns of relapse and recovery
- ! helping the kinship network understand the impact of substance abuse on all members of the network and the role they can play in the recovery process
- ! identification of and linkage to substance abuse treatment resources

### **Unit IV Convening the Kinship Network**

- ! criteria for assessing the appropriateness of various permanent plans
- ! use of permanency planning and family preservation principles
- ! assessing adequacy of social support and identifying key members of the kinship network
- ! skills in convening relevant members of the kinship network

### **Unit V Decision-making: Family Empowerment**

- ! exploring with the kinship network permanency options and their implications
- ! helping the kinship network define permanency from their perspective
- ! engaging the kinship network in a plan to ensure the child's protection/safety and well-being
- ! facilitating the family's (re)definition of relationships
- ! increasing caseworker's ability to use the formal (child welfare) system to enhance the functioning of the informal (extended family, community, kinship care) system

### **Unit VI Supporting Permanent Plans**

- ! disengaging from the kinship network
- ! assisting kinship networks in identifying what they need to do to ensure the child(ren)'s safety and to follow through with permanency plans

## Overview of the Training Videotapes

Two training videotapes accompany this manual. These videotapes are divided into four segments, two segments on each tape. Each segment is briefly described below and the use of each segment is discussed in the learning activities section of relevant learning units in this training manual.

- ! In the first segment, *Developing a Broad View of Family*, the caseworker interviews the mother of a child placed in kinship foster care. Use of the genogram and eco-map are demonstrated as tools for engaging the mother in a professional helping relationship and assisting the caseworker in developing a broad view of the child's family. This segment is first referenced in the learning activities section of Unit I (29:26 minutes).
  
- ! In the second segment, *Discussing Permanency and Assessing Social Support*, the caseworker interviews the child's kinship caregiver, the maternal grandmother. This interview occurs approximately one year after the interview with the child's mother that is depicted in the first segment. The caseworker discusses with the caregiver the likelihood that the child will not return home to the mother, and explores the caregiver's willingness to provide a permanent home for the child through adoption or legal guardianship. The caseworker demonstrates a method of assessing the kinship caregiver's social network and determining with the caregiver what members of the network should be invited to a family decision-making meeting. This segment is referenced in the learning activities section of Unit IV (24:34 minutes).

- ! In the third segment, *Facilitating Family Decision Making*, the caseworker conducts a meeting with the caregiver, the child's mother, maternal aunt, paternal aunt, and a maternal uncle. The caseworker helps the family consider the permanency goal for the child, to determine which family members will assist the caregiver in rearing the child, and to begin to discuss changes in family roles which are likely to occur if the child is adopted or legal guardianship is transferred to the caregiver. This segment is referenced in the learning activities section of Unit V (32:35 minutes).
  
- ! The final segment, *Supporting Permanent Plans*, depicts a subsequent family meeting that takes place after the caregiver has decided to assume legal guardianship of the child. The child's mother, aunts, and uncle are present at this meeting as well. The purpose of this meeting is to help the family look into the future, to take a long-term view of child-rearing, and to confirm and strengthen commitments made by each family member to assist in rearing the child to adulthood. This segment is referenced in the learning activities section of Unit VI (39:31 minutes).

## How To Use This Manual

The content of this manual reflects a small portion of the foundational knowledge and skills that a qualified caseworker needs. The six learning units assume and build upon basic knowledge and skills in the following areas:

- ! child development and assessment of children's needs
- ! interviewing children and adults

- ! assessment of child safety and risk of harm and identification of various types of child abuse and neglect
- ! service planning
- ! parental substance abuse
- ! working with the court system
- ! case management
- ! networking and collaborating with community service providers.

The six learning units can be expanded or contracted depending on staff training needs, agency structure, and resources. For example, experienced child welfare caseworkers may need less emphasis on the first part of Unit I dealing with the laws, policies, and permanency planning principles, however, considerable attention should be given to this content with new caseworkers. Caseworkers with some experience in kinship care may benefit more from an emphasis on understanding the relative merits of the formal and informal systems of helping, or on developing skills in convening and facilitating decision-making with extended families of children involved with the child welfare system. The training manual can also be used in a variety of different formats: group training, on-the-job training with a supervisor, caseworker self-directed learning, or some combination. We recommend enlisting experienced caseworkers and supervisors as presenters and facilitators to assist newer staff in their learning. We hope that the training manual and videotapes are helpful to a variety of staff persons who may be well equipped to facilitate training events but have little time to collect and prepare training materials. Agencies should assess their staff needs and resources to determine how to make best use of the manual.

If training is to be conducted in a group, a half or whole day may be devoted to each learning unit. The discussion section in each unit can be used as a lecture outline or as a reading to be distributed to participants in advance of the session. The figures in the

discussion section are duplicated as full page handouts in the handouts and overheads section that follows the discussion section. These handouts may be duplicated and distributed during the training session. Many of these handouts may also be made into transparencies for use with an overhead projector during the session.

Group training should emphasize active participation in discussion, role-plays and other exercises, with adequate opportunity for participants to exchange and receive feedback on the experiences. If the manual is used to assist supervisors in training individual staff persons and to guide the self-directed learning of caseworkers, the discussion section in each learning unit may be reviewed by the caseworker and discussed during supervisory conferences. We also encourage the reader to develop creative ways of using and enhancing the training materials contained in this manual to meet unique needs and to support individual learning styles.

Whether the training is conducted in a group with a training facilitator, in individual supervisory sessions, or is primarily self-directed, supervisors can assist their staff in assessing their knowledge, skills, and learning needs, and help each caseworker develop individual learning goals. The supervisor is also essential in helping caseworkers to correctly implement the practice principles and methods with children and families served in kinship foster care, by providing on-going, on-the-job training to caseworkers.

Implementing the practice principles and methods described throughout this training manual both requires and facilitates more creativity than is common in child welfare practice. This creativity is essential to facilitating permanency for the diverse and unique families served by the child welfare system. Therefore, caseworkers will need the support and encouragement of their supervisors and others in their agency settings to facilitate implementation of the practice principles and methods described in this training manual.