



PERMANENCY

PLACEMENT STABILITY



PLACEMENT STABILITY

WHY IT MATTERS

According to the 2016 AFCARS Report,¹ the majority of children and youth (ages 5 to 17) in foster care experienced a least one placement change:

- 35% experienced one placement change
- 37% experienced two to three placement changes
- 13% experienced four to five placement changes
- 14% experienced six or more placement changes

As research clearly asserts, changing home placements is usually associated with poor outcomes in permanency, safety and well-being. Placement stability is the foundation for children to develop healthy and secure relationships and it serves to reduce the potential stressors that arise from being displaced multiple times. As more is learned about the impacts of trauma, placement changes can trigger traumatic experiences and reduce a child's ability to build resilience.

Frequent placement moves not only compound the issues of being separated from one's parents, but they may also separate siblings, school friends and supportive adults, relatives, and the very community that the child

is accustomed to. Placement stability has a direct impact on a child's ability to successfully graduate high school on time. The more placement changes a child or youth has the greater likelihood that they will experience increased school absences, be retained a grade, be identified as having special needs, be more likely to have school discipline issues leading to suspensions and expulsions from school, and more likely to drop-out of school without a diploma or GED equivalent.²

For young children, placement changes can have a profound impact on their brain development. These disruptions can increase stress-induced related responses and create alternations in the brain. One study found that the younger the age at first foster placement along with higher number of placements are associated with altered hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) functioning which increases cortisol levels and stress response. Depending on what developmental stage the young child is in, changing caregivers can detrimentally impact their ability to form secure attachments and stay on target developmentally.³

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Factors that influence placement stability, include⁴:

- **Timing in placement.** Research studies reveal that the initial phase of placement is when children are at greatest risk for future placement instability. Getting the right placement the first time is critical, especially for babies and young children who are developmentally unable to absorb the changes.
- **Characteristics of the home.** The age of other children in the placement can impact stability. Research has found that if children are placed with similarly aged children in the home –either other children in foster care or the foster parents’ own children, this can create more conflicts over belongings and attention, with more stress resulting in placement disruption.
- **Children’s characteristics.** These include things like the child’s gender (research reveals a greater likelihood that girls will experience placement instability), and the child’s age (research shows that the older the child is at initial placement, the more likely that placement will disrupt). Evidence suggests that children of color are more likely to have unsuccessful permanency planning and are less likely to reunify. These things contribute to more placement instability. Mental and behavioral health concerns of children also are cited as one of the strongest predictors of placement instability and a common reason that foster parents request the removal of a child in their care.
- **Type of placement.** Research is continuing to compare placement stability rates between foster care and kin/relative placements and finding that some studies point to kinship care placements as being more stable.⁵
- **Foster parent characteristics.** Foster parents who have greater social support systems such as extended family, are more likely to provide a stable placement for the child. Adequate preparation and training for foster parents is also a factor in reducing placement instability.
- **Worker and agency characteristics.** The more educated the social worker assigned to the case is, has shown to be associated with reduced placement instability.
- **Worker retention.** Studies have found that worker stability is also associated with placement stability and for babies, even one change in their case worker can impact their stability significantly. The fewer workers that a child has is also related to the increased probability that they will be reunified. Having the worker make consistent and regular visits to the placement positively influences stability.

ADVOCATES IN ACTION

One foster care agency found that each placement change required at least 25 hours of additional casework time to process the change in placement. For children, they are more likely to be distressed, exhibit more emotional and behavioral problems and experience trauma.

ACTIONS

One of the most important roles an advocate can play in advocating for the best interests of the child is ensuring that their placement is healthy, secure and stable.

Promoting placement stability can enhance positive outcomes in safety, permanency, and well-being.

- **Visit the child and caregivers regularly.** Regular visits at the child's placement will help both the child and their caregivers feel less isolated and more connected to your support. Just as regular visits by a social worker are associated with better outcomes for children in care, a volunteer's role can be as influential.
- **Learn about potential barriers or concerns that might impact a child's placement stability.** As an advocate, you can inquire to how things are going in the home, each and every time you visit. For younger children who may be unable to communicate their needs, you may need to make more frequent visits to understand how the child is doing in their placement and to identify any potential risks to the placement disrupting.
- **Ensure placement specific services** that will help maintain placement stability. This may include transportation assistance, respite care or foster-family counseling. Learn about what stressors are present in the placement and work to help reduce those by identifying supports through the child welfare agency and/or community.
- **Inquire about child specific services that may help stabilize placement.** Children with mental and behavioral challenges are more likely to experience placement disruption. If you suspect these issues are occurring, encourage the use of training, education, or support directly to the caregiver to help with these issues or support and training to both the child and the caregiver.
- **Identify other supports in the child's life that can help stabilize placement.** For example, research shows that a child or youth who is involved in their school through after school or extracurricular activities and doing well academically, is less likely to have a disrupted placements. Advocate for extracurricular involvement, academic tutoring, mentoring, etc. that will support a child's school success and consequently impact placement stability. Employment or volunteer activities may also help keep older children busy and engaged, creating less stress in the home.

- **Advocate for concurrent planning.** Research has shown that when concurrent planning is used effectively as designed, it can facilitate the success for achieving permanency in 12 months and reduce the amount of time that children spend in foster

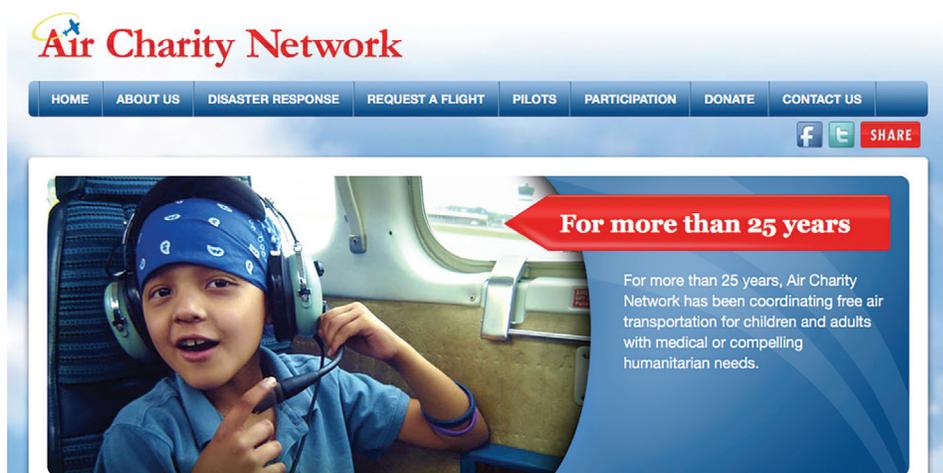
care. Studies show that the earlier concurrent planning is implemented and when it includes the child and/or family in the decision making process, than placement stability is more likely.

BRIGHT SPOT

ANGEL FLIGHT DALLAS CASA

Many programs face difficulties when advocating for children placed far from their local court jurisdictions. These situations threaten volunteer retention, increase costs to the local program and create barriers to regular contact with the child which as described in this issue brief, can impact placement stability. Several years ago, Dallas CASA developed a model partnership with the regional affiliate of a non-profit organization, *Angel Flight*. *Angel Flight* pilots donate their time, private planes and fuel to fly CASA volunteers, staff and children to long distance placements.

Dallas CASA has used the service for child visits, pre-placement home assessments, meetings and for special events benefiting the child. Dallas CASA built *Angel Flight* operations into its training and case assignment procedures, identifying supervisors and volunteers willing to take *Angel Flight* cases and matching accordingly. Since 2014, Dallas CASA and *Angel Flight* have flown more than 120 missions. Pilots have enjoyed using their unique skill to help CASA/



GAL volunteers connect with their youth. Dallas CASA has earned respect and admiration from judges and other stakeholders for maintaining regular contact with children that others can't reach, all while reducing the costs of remote advocacy. With a network of *Angel Flight* organizations spanning across the United States, *Angel Flight* is poised to expand this partnership nationwide, with Dallas CASA's leadership, to help CASA/GAL programs provide caring and consistent advocacy to children in placements that are faraway.

For more information, contact training@casaforchildren.org

To learn more: <http://aircharitynetwork.org/contact-us/>

SELECTED RESOURCES

Name	Description
<u>Child Welfare Information Gateway, <i>Strategies to Minimize Placement Disruptions</i>⁶</u>	<p>This resource contains a number of articles and tips for minimizing placement disruptions.</p>
<u>Child Welfare Information Gateway, <i>Instability in Foster Care</i>⁷</u>	<p>This resource discusses the causes of child placement instability and the consequences for child well-being. Also addresses strategies for combating placement instability.</p>
<u>National Foster Parent Association (NFPA)⁸</u>	<p>The National Foster Parent Association is a non-profit, volunteer organization established in 1972 as a result of the concerns of several independent groups that felt the country needed a national organization to meet the needs of foster families in the United States. Their mission is to be a respected national voice for foster, kinship, and adoptive families through networking, education, and advocacy.</p>
<u>National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment, <i>Placement Stability and Permanency</i>⁹</u>	<p>The purpose of this resource is to provide information on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a sufficient, diverse pool of foster, adoptive, and kinship families that can meet the needs of the children and youth in foster care in your child welfare system; • Engaging and supporting families from their initial contact with your agency all the way through post-placement.

ENDNOTES

- 1 National AFCARS file from NCANDS; data of point-in-time count of children in care 9/30/16.
- 2 See “Fostering Success in Education: National Fact Sheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care” (April 2018). Available at: <http://www.fostercareandeducation.org/>
- 3 For more information, see Issue Briefs “Early Development and Trauma Impacts on Young Children” and “Attachment Supports for Caregivers.”
- 4 The factors summarized here were adapted from “Placement stability in child welfare services: Issues, concerns, outcomes and future directions literature review.” UC Davis Extension: Center for Human Services. www.humanservices.ucdavis.edu/academy
- 5 For more information on Kinship placement see Issue Brief, “Kinship Care Supports.”
- 6 <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/outofhome/placement/strategies/>
- 7 https://cfrc.illinois.edu/pubs/rp_19990701_PlacementStabilityStudy.pdf
- 8 <http://nfpaonline.org/>
- 9 <http://www.nrcdr.org/placement-stability-and-permanency>