

Collaborating to Design, Pilot and Evaluate a New Case Practice Intervention: How Permanency Roundtables Affected Practice and Outcomes in Georgia

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Abstract

Background

In January 2009, Georgia's Department of Human Services (DHS), Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS), and Casey Family Programs implemented a Permanency Roundtable Project to address permanency for nearly 500 children at great risk for long-term foster care. The children were typically older youth primarily from two metro Atlanta counties who had been in care for longer periods of time.

Permanency roundtables are structured professional case consultations that encourage innovative thinking, the application of best practices, and the "busting" of barriers to expediting permanency.

Project goals:

- To expedite the children's movement toward permanency
- To serve as a "learning lab" for casework staff

The project evaluation included a process evaluation, a participant evaluation, and outcome evaluations conducted at 12 and 24 months following the roundtables. Outcome evaluations were designed to determine the children's progress towards achievement of legal permanency and explored permanency predictors and the overall impact of the roundtable project on permanency statewide.

Methods

Data on the 496 children included in the project were collected from case managers prior to the roundtables; from the roundtable team at the roundtable; and from master practitioners, supervisors and case managers at the 12- and 24-month marks.

Key predictor variables included child and family characteristics, child welfare experience, perceived permanency barriers and roundtable-recommended permanency strategies. The primary outcome measure was achievement of legal permanency, which included adoption, guardianship or reunification.

Additionally, the state provided data on children in care in January 1, 2008, the year preceding the roundtables, and January 1, 2009, the year in which the roundtables were conducted. Event history analysis was used to compare time to permanency and achievement of permanency between 2008 and 2009.

Results

Nearly a third of the 496 children in the roundtable project (31%) achieved permanency by the 12-month follow-up. Age was an important factor—younger children were more likely to achieve permanency than were older ones.

Background

- More than 11,000 Georgia children were in foster care at the beginning of 2008.
- Two metro Atlanta counties, Fulton and DeKalb, were under a federal consent decree to improve outcomes, including permanency. These two counties represented 18% of the state's population and 19% of the state's foster care population in 2009.
- Many of the children in these counties had been in care for long periods of time (median of four years).
- It was hypothesized that permanency roundtables would increase the number of children achieving legal permanency.

Permanency roundtables: Structured professional case consultations that encourage innovative thinking, the application of best practices, and the "busting" of barriers to expediting permanency.

Key differences between permanency roundtables and routine case staffing: (1) singular focus on permanency; (2) external permanency experts; and (3) immediate availability of resource personnel in the policy, legal and mental health areas to assist with barrier-busting.

Method

Data Collection & Measures

- Prior to the roundtables, background data collected from case managers included demographics and other child characteristics, family information, child welfare experience, and perceived permanency barriers.
- At 12 months following the roundtable, caseworkers (master practitioners, supervisors, and case managers) provided updated information on the child's legal permanency status (adoption, guardianship or reunification).

Child Characteristics at Time of Roundtable

The Georgia project involved roundtable discussions on 496 children over a six-week period in January and February 2009.

Demographic Characteristic	Age at			
	0-6	7-12	13-18	Total
Gender				
Male	47.8%	56.3%	60.2%	56.9%
Race				
White	5.4%	7.4%	6.7%	6.7%
Not reported	2.2%	1.5%	0.0%	0.8%
Origin				
Non-Hispanic	71.7%	82.2%	76.2%	77.0%
Sibling group size (siblings in care)				
No siblings	34.8%	25.9%	64.3%	48.4%
Two or more siblings	41.3%	51.1%	16.7%	30.6%
Number of different last names in sibling group (n=254)				
Two	29.3%	36.0%	29.2%	31.9%
County				
DeKalb	26.1%	16.3%	32.7%	27.0%
Other	2.2%	6.7%	12.6%	9.1%
Total number of children	92	135	269	496

Other Child/Family Characteristics

- 67% had maltreatment history of neglect; 31% physical or sexual abuse; 26% parental substance abuse; and 21% abandonment.
- About half of their birth mothers and fathers had parental rights terminated.
- Impact of child mental health/behavioral needs on child functioning averaged 1.3 on a 4-point scale ranging from none (0) to severe (3), as reported by caseworkers.

Child Welfare Experience

- Average age at admission: 6.6 years
- Average length of stay (before roundtable): 4.6 years
- Living situation: 35% resided in regular foster care; 25% in group/institutional living situations; 23% in specialized/therapeutic foster care; and 17% in other living situations

Caseworker-Perceived Permanency Barriers

- Birth family (parent, sibling): 24%
- Child (characteristics, willingness): 34%
- Systems (casework, courts, providers): 25%
- Permanency resource (no resource or resource had issues/concerns): 23%

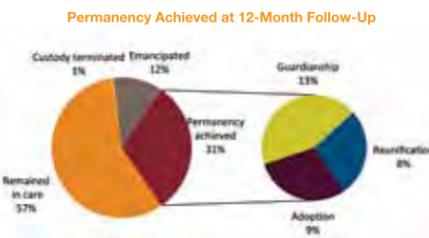
Data Analysis

- The relationship between child and family characteristics, child welfare experience, caseworker-perceived permanency barriers, and legal permanency was examined.
- Because age was significantly related to many of the predictors and to achieving legal permanency, and because there are practice implications for different age groups, separate analyses were run by three age groups: 0-6 (n=92), 7-12 (n=135), and 13-18 (n=269).
- Permanency data were compared for Georgia children in care (and under 18 as of January 1) the year prior to the roundtables (2008) to permanency data for the year during which roundtables were implemented statewide (2009).

12-Month Outcomes

Permanency

- 31% of the 496 children in the roundtable project achieved permanency within 12 months.

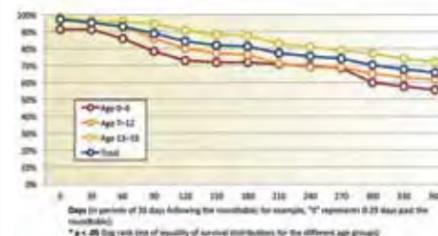


The Impact of Child Age

Youth age 13-18 were least likely to achieve legal permanency within 12 months.



Cumulative Probability of Remaining in Care by Age and Number of Days Post-Roundtable (n=491)*



Permanency Predictors for Children Age 0-6

Child Characteristics

- Age at admission:** Each increasing year of age at admission from 0 to 6 reduced the likelihood of achieving permanency by 25%.
- Mental/emotional/behavioral needs:** Children with no or mild impact of mental/emotional/behavioral needs on their functioning were 8.8 times as likely as those with moderate to severe impact on functioning to achieve legal permanency.
- Siblings:** Children with no siblings were 2.3 times as likely as children with two or more siblings to achieve legal permanency.

Permanency Strategies

- Findings suggested that these strategies were not addressed or addressed sufficiently earlier in the life of the case:
- Diligent search:** Children whose plans included a diligent search strategy were 63% less likely to achieve legal permanency than those whose plans did not include that strategy.
 - Child engagement:** Children whose plans included a child engagement strategy were 87% less likely to achieve legal permanency than those whose plans did not include that strategy.

Permanency Predictors for Children Age 7-12

Child/Family Characteristics

- Abandonment:** Children with a maltreatment history of abandonment were 3.2 times as likely to achieve legal permanency as children without this history.
- Mental/emotional/behavioral needs:** Children with no or mild impact of mental/emotional/behavioral health needs on child functioning were 2.2 times as likely to achieve legal permanency as those with a moderate to severe impact of those needs.

Child Welfare Variables

- Court or legal barrier:** Children with an identified court/legal barrier at the time of the roundtable were 2 times as likely to achieve legal permanency as those who did not have such a barrier.
- Roundtable permanency goals:**
 - Children with a goal of reunification were 10.5 times as likely to achieve legal permanency compared to children who had other permanency goals.
 - Children with a roundtable-recommended goal of guardianship were 4.9 times as likely to achieve legal permanency compared to children who had other permanency goals.

Permanency Predictors for Youth Age 13-18

Child Characteristics

- Gender:** Males were nearly twice as likely as females to achieve legal permanency.
- Permanency resource:** Youth who lacked a permanency resource (identified as a barrier prior to the roundtable) were 78% less likely to achieve legal permanency.
- Youth engagement:** Youth whose engagement in permanency planning was rated as extremely or very engaged were 2.4 times as likely to achieve legal permanency as those whose engagement was rated as none to somewhat engaged.

Permanency Strategies

Findings suggested that the youth did not have significant adults in his or her life at the time of the roundtables:

- Strengthening youth connections with family (siblings, other relatives):** Youth whose permanency plans included the strategy of strengthening connections with family were 46% less likely to achieve legal permanency than those whose plans did not include that strategy.
- Diligent search:** Youth whose permanency plans included diligent search as a strategy were 48% less likely to achieve legal permanency than those whose plans did not include that strategy.

Statewide Permanency Comparison 2008-2009

Datasets were created that included more than 9,000 children in care as of January 1 each year (2008 and 2009). The characteristics of the foster care population in terms of gender, age, race/ethnicity, disabilities, and time in care were nearly identical in the two years. None of the children had roundtables in 2008; less than a third of the children had roundtables in 2009. No child-specific data on roundtables were provided because they were not tracked in the state's child welfare data system.

The rate of achieving legal permanency in 2009 was significantly higher than the rate in 2008 for all ages combined as well as for each of the three age groups separately. The probability of remaining in care at the end of the year statewide was 52% for 2008, compared to 46% for 2009.

Event History Analysis Results Comparing Permanency Results for Georgia Youth Under 18 and in Care as of January 1, 2008 and 2009

Age group	2008		2009	
	Percent achieving permanency	Number of cases	Percent achieving permanency	Number of cases
0-6	56%	4,687	61%*	4,038
7-12	49%	2,748	54%*	2,292
13-18	29%	3,708	34%*	3,143
Total 0-18	45%	11,144	51%*	9,476

*p < .05

These differences were likely due to at least in part to the roundtable project, the statewide implementation of roundtables, and the associated statewide emphasis on permanency values and practice. Another contributing factor may have been Georgia legislation signed in May 2008 that granted jurisdiction to juvenile courts to grant a relative or other person with whom a deprived child has a close relationship permanent guardianship of that child. Nonetheless, the 2008-2009 comparison is a conservative estimate of differences in that not all children served in 2009 had a roundtable and instead some were served with existing approaches.

For more information, visit <http://www.casey.org/resources/publications/garoundtable/12month.htm> or <http://www.caresolutions.com/content/page.cfm/237/>

Questions for Future Research

- What strategies help youth achieve legal permanency?
- What happens to youth after they attain legal permanency?
- Do strategies that appear to take longer eventually have a positive impact on permanency?
- Are there differences in permanency strategies and results within the three age groups included in this study?
- Why were male youth age 13-18 more likely to achieve permanency than female youth in that age group?
- How long do youth who sign back into care voluntarily stay in care and what are their outcomes?

Implications & Recommendations

Establish, strengthen and maintain connections with family, siblings and other caring adults

- Children who lack connections are less likely to achieve legal permanency and more likely to take longer to do so.

Improve programs and strategies

- Communicate permanency values throughout organization.
- Implement structured, in-depth case consultations.
- Address youth mental, emotional or behavioral issues with evidence-based interventions.
- Train line staff in how to engage youth in care in discussions and plans for permanency.

Identify and overcome system barriers

- Adopt aggressive strategies to overcome systemic barriers (casework, court/legal, policy); be creative; seek waivers and exceptions as needed.
- Tailor specific strategies to the youth's needs and development. This study found pervasive differences by age group.

Hire appropriate caseworkers and support them

- Hire those who support permanency values and culture.
- Ensure reasonable workloads.
- Reinforce and celebrate good work.
- Evaluate success in achieving permanency.

Maximize funding/resources

- Seek help from partners.
- Share knowledge/best practices.
- Ensure funding and supports encourage legal permanency and do not provide an incentive to keep children in foster care.

