



DCP Practice Approach

Foundational theories and knowledge Permanency Planning Practice Paper

1. Introduction

This practice paper explores the importance of permanency planning for children and young people and how practitioners can embed it in their practice. This practice paper should be read in conjunction with the [Case planning, review and annual review](#) chapter and [Undertake Family Reunification](#) section in the Ongoing intervention chapter of the Manual of Practice.

2. What is permanency planning?

Permanency planning is a timely, goal-directed approach to case planning promoting children and young people's safety, stability, and a sense of belonging. Permanency planning allows the Department for Child Protection (DCP) practitioners to develop a clear plan for the child or young person's future from the first contact with their family.

Permanency planning focusses on providing children and young people with safe, stable and ongoing care arrangements, whether this be with their family of origin or in care. That said, permanency planning involves more than just determining where the child or young person will live. It also ensures children and young people have:

- ongoing and stable relationships
- a healthy sense of self and identity
- a sense of belonging and connectedness to their family, culture and community.

DCP first priority is for the child or young person to be safely cared for by their family, or to work towards reunification when assessed to be viable. However, this is not always achievable. When the child or young person is placed in long-term care to ensure their safety, active efforts must be taken to secure permanency and ongoing connections to family, culture and community.

When children and young people are placed in care, permanence is typically provided by placing children and young people in long-term family-based care. These placements enable them to develop attachment relationships to their carers, connections with family, community and culture and the associated sense of belonging.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infant, children and young people "... stability is grounded in the permanence of their identity in connection with family, kin, culture and country"¹. Permanence is "... identified by a broader communal sense of belonging; a stable sense of identity, where they are from, and

¹ *Achieving stability for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care*. SNAICC Policy Position Statement July 2016. P.5.



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their place in relation to family, mob, community, land and culture.”² Refer to the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle Practice Paper](#) for further guidance.

Timely decision making is critical to permanency planning. Timely decision making reduces uncertainty for children and young people, their family, carers and communities. The sooner decisions can be made about children and young people’s long-term care arrangements, the greater stability and security children and young people will experience. Overall, timely decision making leads to better outcomes for children and young people.

Timely decision making must take into account the child or young person’s developmental needs. The early years of the child’s life are critical for their development, and the first few years are crucial for developing attachment relationships. Refer to the [Attachment Practice Paper](#) for further guidance. The earlier children and young people can experience stability and develop healthy attachment relationships with consistent primary carers, the better their developmental outcomes will be.

Permanency planning involves remaining committed to securing the best long-term arrangements for children and young people. At times this might mean they are in a residential care placement while a suitable long-term placement is identified. For children and young people in residential care, the current placement may be an interim placement whilst careful considerations are given to their long-term placement. A residential care placement may also become a long-term care arrangement for some children and young people who cannot be safely or successfully placed with a family.

3. Why is permanency planning important?

Permanency planning is reflected in the *Children and Young People (Safety) Act (2017) (CYPS Act)*. Permanency planning requires practitioners to make timely decisions about the care arrangements of children and young people.

Timely decision making

Timely decision making is a legislative requirement under section 10 (1a) of the *CYPS Act*. Section 10 (1a) stipulates that decisions and actions should be taken in a timely manner and made as early as possible in the case of young children in order to promote permanence and stability.

Decisions about the viability of reunification must be made **within six months for children under the age of two years** (due to their critical need to develop a secure attachment relationship with a carer) and **within twelve months for children over the age of two years**.

Timely decisions must be informed by both professional judgement and Structured Decision Making (SDM) tools. Refer to the [DCP Assessment framework](#) and the [Structured Decision Making Family Reunification Assessment Policy and Procedures Manual](#) for guidance. All rationales for decision making must be clearly

² *Achieving stability for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care*. SNAICC Policy Position Statement July 2016. P.7.



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documented using the Consult or Decision Record note in C3MS. Refer to the [Consult or decision record Procedure](#) for further information.

3.1 Safety and stability

Permanency planning ensures that children and young people experience the safety and stability that they require for healthy development and to heal from trauma. Children and young people who have been harmed are at higher risk of:

- developing unhealthy attachment relationships
- experiencing further trauma
- developing emotional and behavioural disturbances.

Refer to the [Attachment Practice Paper](#) for further information. These difficulties can place children and young people at significant risk of poor mental health, substance misuse issues, and problematic interpersonal functioning into their adolescence and adulthood.

Safe and stable care is one of the best ways to mitigate the adverse outcomes and vulnerabilities that children and young people experience following harm and neglect (either with their birth families or in care). Safety and stability are known to improve harmed children's developmental outcomes across the following domains:

- emotional
- behavioural
- physical
- cognitive
- academic
- social
- interpersonal.

The provision of safe and stable care for children and young people is best achieved through high quality assessments and permanency planning.

3.2 Identity development

Children and young people also have better outcomes when they have a strong sense of identity, belonging and connection to culture. When children and young people are harmed and/or separated from their family and culture, their sense of identity can be impacted and their knowledge of and connections to culture can be damaged, which can lead to other negative outcomes, including poor mental health.

Permanency planning promotes stability in terms of their sense of belonging and their connection to family and community. This is especially important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants, children and young people in care, for whom the negative impacts of separation from family, kin, culture, community and Country have been well documented. Refer to the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle Practice Paper](#) for further information.

Similarly, children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds or belonging to New and Emerging Communities have the benefit when connections to culture, kin, religion



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and community is maintained. Refer to the [Working with cultural diversity Practice Paper](#) for further information.

3.3 Reducing uncertainty

It is widely understood that children and young people who experience uncertainty and/or multiple placement changes in care have poorer outcomes. Living with uncertainty and experiencing placement changes can:

- seriously limit the child or young person's ability to form healthy attachment relationships and to develop a sense of belonging
- creates significant anxiety for both the child or young person and their carer
- seriously undermine a carer's capacity to develop a genuine emotional commitment to the child or young person in their care, interfering with the child or young person's development and recovery from harm
- make it difficult for carers to see children and young people as members of their family and make plans together in their future
- lead to placement instability either contemporaneously or in the future (if the development of a healthy attachment relationship has been undermined earlier in the placement)
- place the child or young person at greater risk of developing emotional and behavioural difficulties, and losing connections with family, culture and community.

A carer's commitment to and relationship with the child or young person in their care is best able to develop when the child or young person and their carer have certainty about what the future holds. This certainty can only be achieved through high quality assessment and permanency planning. Refer to the [Supporting and collaborating with carers Practice Paper](#) for further information.

4. The goals of permanency planning

Permanency planning focuses primarily on ensuring that timely decisions are made about children and young people's long-term care arrangements. However, permanency planning can and should achieve much more than this for children and young people, including:

- optimising the child or young person's opportunity to develop a healthy attachment relationship with their caregiver(s)
- optimising the child or young person's opportunity to recover from trauma by achieving permanence for them as soon as possible
- maintaining the child or young person's positive connections with family members and other people who are significant to them
- supporting the child or young person to develop a strong and cohesive sense of identity, which includes both their birth family and culture, and the carers who provide them with long-term care
- preventing unnecessarily prolonged decision making about the child or young person's future care arrangements or related issues, which can cause uncertainty and distress for the child and young person, their family and their carers
- creating a sense of belonging and connection for the child or young person, within the family who provides them with care, and within their community.





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5. How can permanency planning be embedded into practice?

Given the importance of permanency, practitioners must begin planning for permanency from the first contact with families. Ongoing reflection regarding the permanency needs of children and young people should occur throughout all phases of the department's contact with families and carers.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants, children and young people, consultation with the family, kinship, community and Principal Aboriginal Consultant is essential to identify long-term care options. It is important that practitioners follow the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle. For further information, refer to the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle Practice Paper](#).

For children and young people from a CALD background, it is important to support and maintain connections to their cultural and ethnic identity, religion and language to promote their sense of belonging and identity.

5.1 Assessment and case conceptualisation

Permanency planning must be based on comprehensive, timely assessment. Refer to the [DCP Assessment framework](#) for further guidance. Comprehensive assessment of the child or young person's experiences of trauma, attachment relationships and developmental and therapeutic needs is required to inform case conceptualisation.

Good quality case conceptualisation is essential for permanency planning. The more practitioners understand about the child or young person's experiences and needs, the better they can understand how to achieve permanency.

When developing a case conceptualisation, practitioners should ask themselves the following questions to ensure their case decisions appropriately reflect the child or young person's need for permanency:

- What harm or trauma has the child or young person experienced, and how has this affected their attachment relationships, emotional and behavioural functioning, and overall wellbeing?
- How has the child or young person's experiences affected their sense of belonging and identity?
- Is the child or young person's family able to provide safe care and/or connection in a stable and ongoing way?
- Are the changes that the family needs to make to ensure ongoing safety for the child or young personable to be made in a timeframe that meets the child or young person's developmental needs?
- If the child or young person is in care and the viability of reunification with family is not yet known, does the child or young person have the resilience or capacity to cope with uncertainty about their care arrangements while reunification is explored further?
- How would the child or young person's needs be met in care?
- Is there a safe and stable, ongoing care option available to the child or young person?
- If there are multiple placement options for the child or young person, which option will better meet their needs?





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- What cultural considerations have been made?

5.2 Phases of intervention

5.2.1 Investigation and assessment (including family preservation)

The child or young person's need for permanent safe and stable care must be considered from the first contact a practitioner has with a family. It is essential to establish:

- who the child or young person has developed attachment relationships with
- who the stable people and structures are in their life
- who can offer the child or young person a sense of identity, belonging and connection.

This information informs the case conceptualisation and planning for the child or young person's future care.

Practitioners must determine whether or not a family can provide safe, stable care for the child or young person, both in the immediate future and in a way that meets their permanency needs. Practitioners must be prepared for the possibility that the child or young person may need to be removed from their family and placed in care to ensure their safety. They should immediately consider how the child or young person's need for permanence could be pursued in care.

Genograms and ecomaps can help practitioners identify possible carers for children or young people. Early identification of potential kinship carers who can provide the child or young person with safe, stable long-term care in the event that reunification is not possible, the more likely it is for permanency to be achieved within the child or young person's kinship network in a timely way. Refer to [Gather and assess information to identify placement pathways](#) section in the Place a child or young person in care chapter of the Manual of Practice for more information.

5.2.2 Reunification

Practitioners working in reunification are tasked with assessing where the child or young person's need for safety and permanency would best be met. This may be through reunification with their family, or through a long-term placement in care.

Reunification case planning for children and young people must include concurrent planning as part of planning for permanency. Concurrent planning requires practitioners to place the child or young person with carers who may be able to provide care in the longer-term, whilst also exploring and working towards reunification. This ensures that the child or young person will have a stable care arrangement in the event that reunification is no longer viable or is unsuccessful.

Without concurrent planning, children and young people are at risk of experiencing multiple placement changes if reunification is not successful, which ~~leading~~ leads to poor outcomes. Refer to the [Structured Decision Making™ Family Reunification Assessment Policy and Procedures Manual](#) for further information.

5.2.3 Long-term care

If it is assessed that reunification is not in the child or young person's best interests, practitioners must make every effort to ensure that the child or young person is placed with carers who are committed to them and





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able to meet their long-term needs. Such placements can offer children and young people the opportunity to develop healthy attachment relationships. These relationships will support their broader development and recovery from trauma.

At times, a long-term family-based placement may not be available for the child or young person. These children and young people may be placed in short-term family-based care or residential care settings.

Residential care has a limited ability to meet children and young people's attachment needs. It is often not well equipped to offer the level of therapeutic care required to support recovery from trauma. Children and young people can develop attachment relationships in residential or short-term family-based care. They can also experience distress at being separated from their attachment figure(s) when they must leave that placement.

The longer the child or young person lives with uncertainty about their future care, the more anxious, distressed and vulnerable to poor outcomes they are. Practitioners must engage with the child or young person, their family and community to identify a placement that could offer the child or young person safe, stable and permanent care in a timely way. For more information refer to [Gather and assess information to identify placement pathways](#) section in the Place a child or young person in care chapter of the Manual of Practice.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants, children and young people, consultation with the family and kinship network, community and Principal Aboriginal Consultant is essential to help identify potential appropriate long-term care options. In the case where an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander infant, child or young person has been in care less than 12 months or a placement option with family or kin has not been identified, a referral should be made to Taikurtirna Warri-apinthe to assist with family finding and mapping. It is critically important that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants, children and young people are placed in accordance with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle. Refer to the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle Practice Paper](#) for further guidance.

For children and young people and children from a CALD background, consultation with their family, kinship network, community and DCP Multicultural Services is essential to help identify potential appropriate long-term carers and care options. It is critically important that children and young people from a CALD background are placed in accordance with the [Culturally and linguistically diverse child placement Policy](#). Refer to the [Culturally and linguistically diverse child placement Policy](#) for further information.

Even when children and young people are residing in short-term or residential care placements, practitioners can still engage in permanency planning. This can be done by exploring long-term care options and seeking alternative ways to offer the child or young person a sense of permanency through connection to significant people family and kin culture and community. Examples include (but not limited to):

- supporting the child or young person to maintain enduring relationships with significant people through contact arrangements
- supporting the child or young person to forge a sense of identity and belonging by engaging them in community and cultural activities, including sporting groups and cultural events
- for children and young people who have religious and spiritual connections, ensuring those children and young people have frequent opportunities to connect with significant people and places in the community, such as places of worship





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- ensuring children and young people have ongoing connection to their culture.

5.2 Family contact

Contact between children and young people, and their families and other people who have been significant in the child or young person's life is an important part in permanency planning. Positive experiences of contact can:

- promote a sense of belonging
- help children and young people to answer questions about their family of origin
- ensure the development, maintenance and/or strengthening of cultural identity and connection.

Practitioners must reconsider the child or young person's family contact arrangements when family contact is assessed to be:

- distressing to the child or young person
- interfering with the child or young person's ability to develop a healthy attachment with their carer
- causing the child or young person distress or confusion.

For siblings who have been placed separately, family contact can (when emotionally and physically safe) allow the siblings to learn about one another and to develop a relationship, enhancing their sense of identity and belonging.

The [DCP Assessment framework](#) provides practitioners guidance when exploring family contact arrangements. Consultation with a DCP psychologist, Principal Aboriginal Consultant or practice leader may also support quality assessment and case conceptualisation about family contact and its impact on the child or young person's ability to achieve a sense of permanency in care. Any therapists involved with the child or young person. Refer to the [Support the child or young person to develop and maintain family and community connections through contact arrangement](#) key step of the Supporting children and young people in care chapter of the Manual of Practice –for further guidance.

5.2 Partnership and consultation

Permanency planning relies on the partnership and collaboration that practitioners can develop with children, young people, their families and their carers, as well as consultation with experts in the field. Practitioners must priorities consultation with children and young people and learning about their developmental needs. Plans for the child or young person's future can only be made when taking their views into account. Refer to the [Seek the views of the child or young person](#) key step in the Supporting children and young people in care chapter of the Manual of Practice for further information.

Consultation with professionals and agencies who hold specialist knowledge and/or expertise in various areas is also important. For example, consultation with a DCP psychologist can assist practitioners in their understanding of the child or young person's developmental, attachment and broader psychological needs.

Consultation with a Principal Aboriginal Consultant can assist practitioners in their understanding of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infant, child or young person's cultural needs and how these can best be met. Practitioners should also consider consultation with the community, Elders and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations as early as possible. This ensures timely and appropriate decisions are made regarding the infant, child and young people's cultural needs, connections and development. Refer to the





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[Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle Practice Paper](#) for further guidance about ‘participation’ and consultation.

Consultation with the DCP Multicultural Services team should occur to ensure culturally safe and appropriate placements are secured. Practitioners should also work in partnership with families and appropriate community members to gather accurate information and develop an understanding of the cultural, ethnic and religious needs of children and young people from a CALD background to support identification of safe and appropriate placements. For further information refer to the [Culturally and linguistically diverse child placement Policy](#).

6. The importance of reflective practice

Practitioners are better able to develop skills and practice wisdom when they engage in reflective practice. Practitioners are encouraged to use supervision as an opportunity to discuss how they are taking permanency planning and timely decision making into consideration in their practice, and how their case directions reflect children and young people’s needs for permanence and stability.

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