



Technical Assistance Tools

Permanency Planning Instrument

Section 2. Part 1.

Providing Information on Options

Talking about returning home

Talking with a family about the possibility of a child returning home to live will be met with a variety of responses from families. It will almost certainly be emotional. Most families will express that they wish their child could come home. The task is to sort out whether that is a feasible option or a dream that cannot be realistically be met. Some families will be very clear about what they need to enable them to consider their child coming home. In those cases the task will be trying to find ways to get the right supports to the family. For some families, their needs may not be immediately met within the current capacity of the system. For other families, the sincerity of their wish to have the child come home will not perhaps (or at least not yet) translate into a set of concrete identifiable supports.

Assumptions

- Birth families may be skeptical about the idea of their child returning home, especially if they were unable to get the kind of support they needed before they sought placement. So, consideration of returning now is dependent on believing something has change to mean support is as real and reliable to the family as the facility is.
- The possibility of a child returning home is directly related to the match between the family's need and the availability and sustainability of supports.
- What will enable a family to choose to bring their children home is the availability of the right kind of support, in the right quantity or frequency, reliably delivered, amenable to change as needed, and sustainable over time.
- Winning birth families to consider the idea of their child returning home requires building a trusting relationship – trust comes from engaging in active listening and respectful interaction, honoring families' experiences, providing useful information, being approachable and friendly, remaining engaged over time, working hard on behalf of the child and family, persistent problem-solving in the face of obstacles, attending to details, and celebrating successes.

Getting started

The starting point of a discussion needs to be an open invitation that is posed in such a way that it doesn't seem judgmental. One way to open the topic is to follow a discussion about what led to the child's placement away from the family home. Questions that

logically flow from those circumstances can be posed in a way that acknowledges the circumstances that were beyond the family's control.

Some approaches might be,

“Wow, it sounds like you really had your hands full. Are there some things about your situation that have changed since then?”

“It sounds like the facility was there when you needed it and you have been pretty happy with what they have provided for your son/daughter?” It's good that your experience has been so positive. But are there some things that have changed or could change that would resolve some of the difficulties you had when ___ was placed?”

or conversely

“It sounds like the facility was there when you needed it but that you have been pretty unhappy that that was your only option?” I'm sorry that your experience has been so difficult, but there are a number of ways in which the system is changing to try to make things different. Are there some things that have changed in your circumstances or could change that would resolve some of the difficulties you had when ___ was placed?”

It is useful to think about engaging in a conversation, rather than engaging in an interview. Rather than asking closed-ended questions such as, “*Would you be interested in your child returning home?*” questions that are open-ended can be more conducive to exploring possibilities such as, “*When you're most comfortable about your child, what is the source of that comfort? When you are least comfortable what is the source of your discomfort?*” These kind of questions won't necessarily tell you what a family is thinking about their child coming home, but they can give you clues to follow up. For example, a family might say that they are comforted by the availability of staff who know how to work with their child and that they miss being able to see their child regularly. This could then lead to a discussion about moving closer to home. It could also lead to “*What if . . . ?*” questions like, “*What if you could have staff who were as competent as the staff in the facility who could come to your home, instead of you going to the facility?*”

Following the family's lead

If the family expresses interest in their child coming home, then the next step is to plan out activities, including engaging others, to figure out together what it would take to begin to move in that direction and what resources exist.

If the family feels that there is no kind of support that would enable their child to come home, then the topic of an alternate family should be opened. (See “Talking about alternate families” for guidance.)

If the family is ambivalent, then the next step might be identifying how to gently explore further possibilities, rather than assume you need to get a decision in a single conversation. It might be more productive to say something like, *“It sounds like there are lots of things to think about as you’re considering ____’s future and your own. I’d like to help you in thinking it through. I know of some materials that you might find interesting”*. OR *“I know of some people who might be helpful for you to talk to.”*

If the family is unwilling to entertain any options other than the facility, then the conversation should shift in focus to how to help the family be as engaged as possible in their child’s life.

The goal of discussion should be to open the door to further activities, rather than close the door until the next semi-annual plan.