



A permanent non-kin placement project in action

Norma Miller details the process used to find permanent non-kin placements for eight children in Gisborne

Introduction

When the Gisborne Child, Youth and Family office focused on permanent placements, eight children were identified with complex case histories who could not be placed with family/whānau and required permanent caregivers. When a referral was made, the aim was to have a section 128 court plan with an approved goal of permanency out-of-family, but for some cases, use was made of the parallel planning process. Following the initial identification of cases, a permanency coach was contracted part-time to work with the four social workers responsible for these children. The caregiver liaison social worker (CLSW) was also actively involved in this project.

Background of children

Social workers completed a brief referral form on each child to provide overall background information. The six girls and two boys came from both Māori and Pākehā families and ranged in age from 7 to 12. Between them, they had been in care an average of 2.6 years and had had an average of 4.6 previous placements.

Coaching sessions for social workers

Coaching sessions were held from the initiation of the project until after placement on a weekly basis for approximately one and a half hours. These sessions provided an opportunity for focused learning on key aspects of the permanency process. This was a valuable forum for discussion on practical matters at each stage of the process – ideas were shared and social workers were able to support each other. The sessions were designed to meet the needs of social workers with a caseload that included a child needing a permanent placement. After each session social workers were expected to make practical use of the information provided.

Identifying caregivers

A campaign to recruit pool caregivers preceded the specific permanency advertising. The combined campaigns included stories on and photos of several caregivers, and an article on the front page of the local free newspaper. The personal approach by the permanency coach to the media was considered valuable because this generated enthusiasm for the project and resulted in excellent cooperation and significant

free publicity. The permanency coach checked all media material, including the radio promos, which enabled improvements to be made before final publication and broadcasts. The local media has cheaper rates for regular advertisers and, by pointing out that Child, Youth and Family does significant advertising to recruit new social workers, we qualified for these rates. Discussing the position of advertisements on the page and within the newspaper also created better impact. Advertisements and articles placed in a nearby small rural town newspaper also had a good response.

Pseudonyms were used for the advertisements and one of the older children chose his own. All the children knew we were seeking new homes, but not the specifics of the advertising. We spent considerable time discussing how much the children should be told and the impact on them if caregivers were not found.

Police checks and information packs

A relatively detailed response form was developed that included asking the names and ages of any children already living with the respondents so that CYRAS checks could be done on the whole family before the permanency course. All those who responded were also sent police check request forms and an article on permanent caregiving, plus a letter about the proposed course.

This was programmed to start two weeks after the advertising was completed because it was considered crucial to keep up the initial interest and momentum. Arrangements were made with the local police to return reports quickly so unsuitable applicants could be eliminated before the course began.

Permanency information and evaluation course

The content for the permanency information and evaluation course was based on material developed by Rita Derrick, Supervisor of the Permanency Placement Unit. It was modified for local needs and condensed into four weeks, with weekly sessions lasting two and a half hours. Seven couples and two single women attended the course and two whānau caregivers shifting

into the permanent care of children they had been looking after on a temporary basis were also invited to the first three sessions.

Participants were made welcome with such details as playing music, furnishing the meeting room with pot plants

and flowers, and placing a programme for each night on chairs. Social workers attended every session and each took parts of the programme to gain presentation experience and to give variety to the course. They used introductions and a warm-up exercise to generate a relaxed atmosphere. The permanency coach facilitated the sessions and delivered most of the content. This was in recognition of her previous presentation experience and to take pressure off social workers who were still carrying caseloads while participating in this project.

On the fourth evening, information was presented on the children and showed their photographs. If court approval for permanency out-of-family had not been achieved before this night, then those children's identities would not have been given. Their full names were revealed at this time because in a small town participants may have had knowledge of a family and this could have

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influenced their decision. Before any discussion about the children took place, participants were asked to sign a confidentiality agreement. This acknowledged they would need to talk to some family members as part of their decision-making.

The history, education, interests, behaviour/ personality, health and desired future contact with the birth family for each child was presented on a different chart. The child's social worker spoke about the child then the charts were put on the wall. All the social workers then left the participants in the room to view them. The social workers later joined the group and answered individual questions.

Course feedback

Each session concluded with a round when participants were invited to give feedback. This contributed to the social workers getting to know the applicants and assisted the assessment process. The feedback on the evaluation forms was positive and encouraging.

Highlights of the course:

*Seeing the caring way staff spoke of the children.
We can make a difference.
To know there are so many caring people around.*

The organisation of the course:

*Great. Lots of information in short bursts.
Very good, covered a lot of information and didn't hide the difficult stuff.*

Final statement:

Thank you very much for giving the opportunity of participating in this amazing programme.

One caregiver said the course clearly identified the worst possible behaviour and grief reactions one could expect and that it had not been half as bad as she thought it would be. Balancing the reality of how challenging these children could be while not putting caregivers off required careful balance. The fact that all but one of the caregivers had parented older children meant they were more realistic in their expectations and less likely to be disillusioned than first time parents of children of these ages.

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Assessment process

Application packs were available on the final night of the course. These included application, medical and self-assessment forms. The medical form was altered to make it clear the Department

would pay reasonable costs for the report. All the participants were asked to think carefully about this decision before applying. Those who did so responded within two weeks.

The initial interviews to assess whether the applicants were suitable permanent caregivers were conducted by the permanency coach and the CLSW. When possible matches were identified, the assessments were completed by the CLSW and the child's social worker. Discussing their willingness to continue birth family contact was an important part of the assessment process.

Two couples and the two single women were recruited as permanent caregivers and another couple have become medium- to long-term caregivers for difficult teenage boys. It was noticeable that most participants applied for the child/children they were initially drawn to in the newspaper profiles. We had not anticipated the

positive response we got, such as receiving three applications for two sisters. The permanency coach and social workers involved in the project decided who could best meet the needs of each child. This was done in consultation with the supervisors, the acting practice manager and the care and protection panel. Follow-up feedback to the unsuccessful applicants and meeting with them to discuss whether they would consider other children required very sensitive casework.

Introducing the children to the new caregivers

This was done in a number of steps.

1. The child was shown photographs of the new caregiver/s on either the day they met or the day before. Caregivers had sent in profiles with their applications.
2. The first meeting was in a neutral place with a social worker present.
3. After this the child had a meal at home with the new caregiver/s or a weekend visit with caregivers who were some distance from town.
4. Following this, social workers talked to the children and the caregivers, and asked for their reactions to each other. All new caregivers and children were very positive about their initial meetings and keen to move on with the process as soon as possible. All but one placement occurred within one to three weeks from the first meeting. One placement was delayed for several weeks so the sisters could end the year at their school. In hindsight, this may not have been the best option because it created confusion for the girls and prolonged the process for the new caregivers.
5. The project took eight months from the first coaching session until the last two children were placed. Using knowledge gained from this project, another project is under way which is programmed to take six months.

Learning points

It is worth noting some of the issues identified on this project:

1. It is important for social workers to record comments from caregivers and children because valuable information can be gained and given.
2. In their enthusiasm for the placements to proceed as soon as possible, there was a tendency for caregivers to put pressure on social workers to move the children without discussing any changes as a team.
3. We tried to discuss with the older children suitable timeframes for the move, such as whether they wished to complete the school year at their current school. Those decisions were too big and confusing for the child – this was especially noticeable if they had been with good temporary caregivers and had divided loyalties.
4. The couples all had grown-up children and they had a preference for taking two children so they were not raising an only child.
5. Radio advertising attracted two out-of-town responses, which required additional and unexpected planning.
6. Potential caregivers should be strongly encouraged to attend the course.

Conclusion

All social workers who took part in this project found it extremely rewarding. The commitment and enthusiasm of the four new permanent caregivers was overwhelming. There have been some challenges and two caregivers have needed extra support. Sadly the out-of-town placement of the seven-year-old has broken down. The team has had a meeting to discuss what they can learn from this experience.

All the new caregivers were very open to ongoing sibling/whānau contact while accepting the

advice of social workers when, for safety reasons, there needed to be limitations on this. The new caregivers' extended whānau embraced the children early in the new placements. The social workers were impressed with the support networks some caregivers had arranged. A social worker spoke of the importance of knowing the children as she sensed they could trust her decision regarding their new permanent caregiver.

Soon after their placement two children commented to their social worker that they "must be the luckiest children in New Zealand". When the social workers asked why, they said they had "the best" home. Two unrelated children placed in one family have been part of a *Mucking In* television programme.

Their caregivers said their contribution was "awesome". On her first weekend visit one 12-year-old girl was given a taonga by a family friend who shared her own life experience with her. Observing the children's happiness and personal development has been very rewarding. A 12-year-old-boy who had never said anything positive about himself recently said "I've learnt I'm good at something. I'm good at cricket."

Seven of the eight children were placed, which was a great outcome. A home was not found for one child and he will be part of the second permanency campaign that is now in progress. One of the placements broke down and that child is also part of the second campaign. At the time of publication, six children have been with their new caregivers for four to six months.

TIMEFRAME FOR PERMANENCY WITH STRANGERS

| <i>Week</i> | <i>Permanency coach</i> | <i>Social workers and CLSW</i> |
|-------------|--|--|
| 1 | Prepare and present weekly training. Overview of permanency process. Discussion on tools to use to get to know child better. Analysis of children's needs. Advertising. Contact media – newspapers and radio. Start to prepare caregiver stories and other publicity. | Attend training each week. Get to know children. Prepare analysis of each child's needs. CLSW may assist with caregiver stories for the media. |
| 2 | Social worker training: Preparing children and caregivers for placement moves. See Morris (2004). Factors influencing the reaction of children to separation. See Fahlberg (2004). | Look for photo opportunities for children. Consider age appropriate preparation for moving child. Inform current caregivers of process. Discuss the children's needs with present/former caregivers if appropriate. |
| 3 | Social worker training: Life story books – show examples. Preparation of specific child profiles for media. Discuss who will respond to advertising. Organise response forms and the process to obtain quick police reports. | Work on life story books and include child in process if appropriate. Start profiles for each child. |

| <i>Week</i> | <i>Permanency coach</i> | <i>Social workers and CLSW</i> |
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| 4 | Social worker training: See Dickinson and Tonkin (2001). Discuss child profiles as a team. Assist social workers with these on 1:1 basis if necessary. | CLSW to respond to general responses Discuss content of profiles with current caregivers |
| 5 | Social worker training: Contact with birth family. See Macaskill (2002) and Derrick (2004). Further general information on caregiving in media. Profiles to media. Organise previous caregivers to share their experiences on course and arrange to meet with them to clarify important issues to cover. | Spend quality time with child. Work on life story books. Finalise profiles of children and give to permanency coach to collate. |
| 6 | Social worker training: Preparation for permanency course. Presentation skills training. Finalise caregiver stories for media. Organise clerical person to send out article on permanency, police forms and invitations to course, and to do CYRAS checks on respondents and their children. | Take phone calls from potential caregivers (social work role). |
| 7 | Permanency team support meeting. Child profiles in media. | Spend quality time with child. Work on life story books. Take phone calls from potential caregivers. |
| 8 | Permanency team support meeting. Continue the child profiles in media. Begin two weeks of advertising. | Take phone calls from potential caregivers. |
| 9 | Permanency team support meeting. Preparation for permanency course. | Preparation for some participation in permanency course. |
| 10 | Permanency team support meeting. Preparation for permanency course. | Continue with life story books and preparing child for move. |
| 11 | Permanency course session 1. Go over each session on the day of the course. Debrief and preparation for next session. | Attend and participate in permanency course. |
| 12 | Permanency course session 2. Preparation. Debrief and preparation for next session. | Attend and participate in permanency course. |
| 13 | Permanency course session 3. Preparation. Debrief and preparation for next session. | Attend and participate in permanency course. |
| 14 | Permanency course session 4. Preparation. Debrief on permanency course. | Attend and participate in permanency course. Social workers present photos and information on children ready to proceed with a permanent placement. |

| <i>Week</i> | <i>Permanency coach</i> | <i>Social workers and CLSW</i> |
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| 15 | Social worker training on assessment process. Arrange for clerical support to send out application packs and make up caregiver files for applicants. | Continue work with child. |
| 16 | Permanency team support meeting. Permanency coach and CLSW start assessment of suitability as permanent caregivers. Keep counsel for child informed. | Continue with life story books. |
| 17 | Permanency team support meeting. Continue assessment process. Discussion on pre-placement process. Team discussion on which caregiver could best meet needs of each child. | Social workers involved in assessment once caregiver/s identified as possibilities for a specific child. Check if child needs extra clothing for new placement or items specific to new home (for example, some children needed wetsuits). |
| 18 | Permanency team support meeting. Assessment process. Team decisions on placement options. | Assessment process. If new caregiver is going to need beds or drawers, start order process. Caregivers approved after consultation with CPRP. Care plans written with clear information regarding birth family contact. |
| 19 | Permanency team support meeting. | Children introduced to new caregivers. |
| 20 | Permanency team support meeting. | Introductions to new caregivers completed. |
| 21-24 | Permanency team support meetings to continue for as long as considered necessary after placements made. | Placements. Regular visits from both social worker and CLSW. |

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