

## THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE *A PERMANENT HOME*

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Imagine yourself on a trip. You have just learned that your house with everything in it has burned to the ground. Where will you go? What shall you do?

Imagine yourself homeless in a big city. You live in a cardboard box. If it gets too cold, you must try to find food and a shelter. The shelters are full and you move from one to the next.

Imagine yourself a refugee. A hurricane has flooded and destroyed your home. You are on a bus headed somewhere, you don't know where. Or you are in a war zone. Your home has been destroyed. Your family is missing, perhaps dead. You are wandering around, don't know where you are supposed to go. Nobody wants you.

Imagine trying to launch yourself from a water bed. Trying to jump up and down. Even simply trying to turn over. It's hard to get anywhere when you must start from a moveable base.

Foster parents in training are sometimes asked to write down the ten people or things they value most on separate slips of paper. Then they are asked to give up one, throw it in the trash basket, discuss their loss. One by one, they are asked to get rid of what they value, till finally they arrive at the last treasure. Give that up too. And that is how a foster child feels when he first comes to your house.

Take that one step further. Time drags on in the new home but nothing happens. The child becomes attached and so does the foster parent. But still nothing happens to suggest permanence. The child wonders if anyone really cares enough to make a family commitment.

The foster parent may want the child to stay, but bureaucracy and unending fruitless reunifications continue. The child is removed, shuffled around, loses people he or she had come to trust, reaches out to people that disappear. No matter how cogent and rational the explanations, the child knows better. He fantasizes: "If you really loved me, you would keep me. No one loves me. I am not worth much. I can't trust anyone. I will never have a place called home."

Delay is child abuse. We know the consequences of delay, both from psychological research and from the law. We know the harm that can result from drifting along in foster care. Yet too often the state moves from abuse by the birth parents to further abuse by the welfare departments and courts, the very systems that were designed to protect the child.

The research shows that bonding is likely after three months, probable after six, and almost certain after 12 months. Interrupted bonding takes a heavy physical and emotional toll. For these reasons, the law allows for a change in the permanency plan after six months, and requires that a termination of parental rights be filed after 12-15 months.

So why do we fail to show the urgency that the research and laws insist upon? No matter what the reason, time without a resolution sends a message to the child in care: “No one really wants you. You must not be a good person.”

There are several reasons why children remain in limbo. Some delays are systemic. The caseworker is too busy to set up the case plan, visit the home, prepare for a court hearing. The courts allow continuances because the parties have not been properly notified, a more compelling matter must be heard, the attorneys have a scheduling conflict.

Other reasons are given. Blood is thicker than water. Every effort must be made to find a biological relative. This makes sense at the start, when the child is removed from the parental home and first placed. However, as time passes and bonding inevitably takes place, a foster parent who wishes to adopt should take precedence over a heretofore unknown relative.

Bonding outweighs kinship. Significant psychological connections are real and vital, and they are more important than mere blood relations. The marriage bond is not a blood relationship but it is an example of a significant attachment that supercedes biological relationships.

Another reason sometimes given by caseworkers and courts to delay is that getting it right takes time. “We must wait until we are sure we have it right.” What a mistake that is. No matter how “right” the final resolution may appear, a sure way to get things wrong is to wait. While the system waits, the child is growing and developing, both physically and psychologically. Waiting is destructive.

“Older children should be allowed to choose whether they want to be adopted.” This is a tough one. The young person must have a voice. Yet we know that most 14-year-olds have a very naïve idea of how the world works, what it takes to survive as an adult. They may brashly want to be free of any parental controls. They may have a hope of being reunited to an idealized birth parent, having forgotten the neglect and abuse they earlier experienced. That may remain the only “true” home they have known. Or they may be reacting with rejection to the fact that they have felt rejected.

A wise foster parent who is offering a forever home through adoption must be patient and not force the issue. Stress the value of a lifetime connection, a place to which one can always return. Every person has the right and need for a permanent home, even when, for the moment, they feel otherwise. Offer the chance for continuing contact with the birth parents through a cooperative adoption.

So what can be done to hasten the process without jeopardizing good sense? Knowing that waiting can be harmful, how can we avoid delay and still get it right? Here are four strong suggestions.

1. **Follow the laws and policies.** In practice, federal and state laws set a limit of one year in which to find the child a permanent home, either through reunification or adoption. Take that mandate seriously. A year is already a long time in the life of a child.
2. **Begin at once.** The caseworker should give the birth parents a reunification plan within 48 hours after removing the child. This is not hard. What is the plan? It is a direct response to the very reasons for removal. The plan can be revised as more information becomes available. A concerned birth parent would be happy to know how to get their child back and would start at once. An immediate case plan may include any or all of the following, with dates to be completed:
  - (1) **Health of Birth Parent.** Medical evaluation and/or treatment; Mental health evaluation and/or treatment; Drug screening; AA attendance; etc.
  - (2) **Change of Residence.** Move to acceptable housing; Separate from abusive person; etc.
  - (3) **Employment.** Show number of jobs applied for; Obtain a job; Hold a job for \_\_\_ weeks; etc.
  - (4) **Parent Training.** Classes; Observation time with foster parent; Volunteer time at daycare center, etc.
  - (5) **Visitation.** When? Where? How often?
3. **Follow up.** The caseworkers should set deadlines for the completion of each task and check regularly. If the birth parents accomplish their tasks, that hastens reunification. If not, that may be evidence for termination. Delays may occur because the birth parents are unable or fail to accomplish the required tasks in a timely manner. Delays must not stem from the caseworker failing to give the birth parents an immediate reunification plan or from a failure to check if deadlines are met. Birth parents must know what they need to do from the start, and then must be held accountable.
4. **Zero tolerance for delays.** The child's rights are paramount. Delays are a form of child abuse. Every effort must be made by the welfare system and the courts to avoid delays. Delays should not be granted for the mere convenience of the adults, but only for the most serious and unavoidable reasons.

Children in foster care are adrift without a firm base. Too often the attitude is that they are just children. They have a roof over their head. They are being fed. They are attending school. They are physically safe and secure. So what's the problem? Children

need more than a warehouse. They need a permanent home within a reasonable time. They need to belong somewhere. We all do.

Children are our most valuable resource, our hope for the future. Foster children are our most vulnerable citizens. Concern for their well-being must have the highest priority. Delays in establishing permanence hurt the foster child. Every child has the right to a permanent home within a reasonable time.

**from Adoption in Child Time**

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