



Why Involving Entire Families in Child Protection Cases Can Improve the Lives of Endangered Children

Susan Meyers Chandler, University of Hawai'i at Manoa
Laurie Ariel Tochiki, EPIC 'Ohana

Annually, about 435,000 children across the United States are taken away from their custodial parents following a confirmed incident of abuse or neglect. In 2015, approximately two million cases of abuse and neglect were accepted for investigation by child protection services agencies in the fifty U.S. states. Although other family members currently care for such children in informal arrangements, the vast majority of children in protective cases are placed with non-biological foster families (now called resource families) until the parent's home is considered safe.

Outcomes in the child welfare system are relatively poor – with such children at high-risk for school dropout, homelessness, unplanned and unwanted pregnancies, and future joblessness. According to available research, kinship and foster placements protect children and eventually reunite them with their biological parents about equally, yet kin placements are less disruptive. In practice, however, many child protective services agencies do not encourage kin to get involved in decisions until after a case of abuse or neglect has been confirmed.

Challenges in the Child Welfare System

Children and families who enter the child welfare system often have multiple challenges including behavioral health issues, special educational needs, substance abuse challenges, and delinquency. Often the families are poor, struggle with food and housing insecurity, and may have poor parenting skills or mental health challenges.

Various public agencies are charged with meeting these multiple needs, but child protective services agencies, by legal mandate, are the sole state system charged with ensuring children's safety and well-being – and these agencies are bound by firm administrative rules and practices that often exclude family members and other relatives from involvement in decisions about the child. Due to confidentiality requirements, other child-serving agencies may not be involved, either. Nevertheless, research shows that children needing protection do better when their families are involved; and collaboration among various service agencies also improves outcomes for children and their families.

What Can Be Done?

Although family inclusion does not consistently happen, it is stressed by most child protective services agencies and a cornerstone of federal and state policy. The federal Fostering Connections Act of 2008 now requires that, within 30 days, child protective services notify adult relatives and grandparents that a child has been removed from parental custody. Family members are required by law to be included in case planning and decision-making meetings. In addition, financial assistance for guardianships is now provided when children are placed with relatives.

The 2010 Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act Reauthorization requires agencies to document their capacity to ensure meaningful involvement of family members in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of child protective decisions.

For all states, a Child and Family Services Review evaluates conformance with federal requirements. This review measures family engagement and agency practices that reach out to extended family members. Restorative practices are encouraged – such as agency efforts to promote healing in family relationships and involvement in family conferences. Newer models of family engagement include creating family “circles” that acknowledge the harm done, further child safety and parental confidence, and provide ongoing family support services.

Lessons from Innovations in Hawai'i

The state of Hawai'i has a state-wide system of family conferencing that is offered to all families entering the child welfare system. Family Group Decision Making is based on an indigenous process developed in New Zealand. In Hawai'i, the Ohana Conferencing model draws upon western mediation and social work practice, as well as the indigenous Hawaiian practice of reconciliation and forgiveness. The system has involved more than 17,000 families in the decisions involving children in the child welfare system, by assuring that families are:

- Included in the decision-making process as true, respected and active partners in the decisions that affect them;
- Listened to and heard, with their input valued;
- Encouraged to find appropriate strategies to solve their own problems;
- Actively engaged in collaborative problem-solving;
- Equipped with the knowledge that there are partners in the community to help support the child and the family;

Using Ohana Conferencing has allowed Hawai'i to enjoy one of the highest percentages of kinship care in the child welfare system. The state is in the top three for kinship care, and more than two-fifths of children in protective care have been placed with kin since 2008.

Ohana Conferencing is strengthened by Hawaii's strong process for strong commitment to finding kin and including all appropriate family members in the decisions about protection and foster care placements. This Family Finding process has reduced the number of children living in foster care and improved outcomes for the state's endangered children.

Read more in Joan Pennell, Myles Edwards, and Gale Burford, “Expediated Family Group Engagement and Child Permanency.” *Child & Youth Services Review* 32, no. 7 (2010): 1012-1019; Robin Perry, Jane Yoo, Toni Spolianksy, and Pebbles Edelman, “Family Team Conferencing: Results and Implications from an Experimental Study in Florida.” *Child Welfare* 92, no. 6 (2013): 63-96; Wilma Friesema, “Restoring Connections: Hawaiian Values and the EPIC 'Ohana, Inc. Programs that Serve the Children and Families in Hawaii's Foster Care System,” *Restorative Justice in Practice* (Vanderplas Publishing) 2015; Janess Sheets, Kim Wittenstrom, Rowena Fong, Joyce James, Michael Tecci, Donald J. Baumann, Carolyne Rodriguez “Evidence-Based Practice in Family Group Decision-Making for Anglo, African American and Hispanic Families,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 31, no. 11 (2009): 1187-1191.