



## PLACEMENT FUNDAMENTALS AND TDM

*Team Decisionmaking (TDM), one of the 4 core strategies of Family to Family, illustrates many key values of the initiative: including families as team members; focusing on safety; striving to preserve families; assessing children's unique needs; involving the community; supporting resource families; promoting timely permanence; and continual analysis of lessons learned to guide future program decisions. Family to Family principles provide guidance for child welfare staff in the homefinding/ placement process, including careful assessment of each child/youth's individual needs while selecting a resource, whether kin or a foster home in the community where the child/youth's family lives.*

*Decisions regarding child/youth out-of-home placements are critical, complex and have lifetime effects. To make the best placement-related decision, every TDM meeting must carefully examine safety/protection needs, consider the child/youth's point of view, and weigh ramifications. A quality TDM decision does not seek to prevent removals but to ensure placements only occur when it is evident that the child/youth is at high risk and cannot be protected in their own home; to encourage stability by examining every requested change of placement; to promote safe families when reunified, and to support a secure future for children/youth in every permanency decision.*

### **1. REMOVAL OF A CHILD/YOUTH FROM THEIR PARENTS' CARE SHOULD ONLY OCCUR WHEN THERE IS IMMINENT RISK OF SERIOUS HARM AND IN-HOME SERVICES AND PROTECTIVE SUPPORTS CAN NOT PROVIDE AN ADEQUATE LEVEL OF SAFETY:**

Child welfare staff should only initiate consideration of out-of-home care when a child/youth is at imminent risk of serious harm from abuse and/or neglect. At an Initial Removal TDM, the decision is made whether home-based services and protective supports can provide an acceptable level of safety and protection or if the child/youth must enter temporary out-of-home care while services and interventions are offered to the parent(s). When the TDM team recommends placement for a child/youth, it must also explore the need for concurrent planning and explain timeframes for permanency to the parents at the meeting.

Substitute care can result from either a court filing or a voluntary agreement with the parent(s), though voluntary agreements are not considered best practice in serious risk situations. A child/youth's placement in substitute care could precede a TDM in a crisis situation that requires immediate removal to ensure safety. When the child/youth's placement is in advance of the TDM, the meeting should be held the next working day and always before the initial court hearing.

### **2. EVALUATION OF A CHILD/YOUTH'S UNIQUE NEEDS MUST BE PART OF THE PLACEMENT DECISION:**

The risk and safety discussion at a TDM meeting must address the effects of abuse/neglect in light of the individual child/youth's capacity for resilience and self-protection. Whether placement is being considered for a child/youth with siblings or individually, the child/youth's specific vulnerability must be examined. Similar safety and risk concerns do not necessarily affect every child/youth in the same ways. Individual child characteristics, including age, can increase or decrease the risk of severe harm from abuse/neglect.

### **3. THE TRAUMA OF SEPARATION MUST BE WEIGHED WITH OTHER FACTORS TO DETERMINE THE NECESSITY OF PLACEMENT:**

A child/youth's emotional well-being must be part of the Initial Removal TDM discussion. Removal from parental care is likely to cause psychological harm, and it must be considered. Older youth often voice intense opposition to placement, and this issue must be factored into the discussion about

appropriateness of out-of-home care; teens often succeed in attempts to undermine placement stability, sometimes leading to additional safety risks beyond those that brought them into care.

**4. ASSESSING SAFETY AND RISK IS ONGOING:**

Assessing current safety issues and future risk is crucial and must be continuous throughout an agency's involvement with a family. The evaluation of safety/risk is the foundation for discussion at an Initial Removal TDM and continues to be a significant focus while a child/youth is in substitute care. Evaluating a child/youth's safety is required wherever s/he is residing, as is appraising parental progress in reducing the safety concerns that brought the child into care. Measuring safety for a child/youth in substitute care includes monitoring individuals with caretaking responsibilities and observing living conditions for potential danger. Positive and negative parental progress in addressing safety/risk issues should impact all case decisions, from the supervision level of family visits to ultimate recommendations about placement and custody. Discussion at the Permanency Planning TDM focuses on the impact of service interventions during the time the child/youth has been in care. Critical discussion issues include changes in risk and safety issues from the time the child/youth entered care to the present; and the predicted future level of risk if the child/youth is returned to parental care, or if an alternative permanent family is sought.

**5. OUT-OF-HOME CARE SHOULD BE IN THE LEAST RESTRICTIVE PLACEMENT THAT MEETS THE CHILD/YOUTH'S NEEDS:**

When out-of-home care is required, the child/youth's placement must be in the most family-like living arrangement that meets his/her needs. The TDM team must discuss and make a recommendation about the level of restrictiveness and type of placement, although the specific placement resource may not be identified during the meeting. Placement/homefinding staff should participate in all TDM meetings involving potential out-of-home placement, in order to maximize identification of the best possible placement resource. Placement with siblings and in the child's community must be pursued to minimize trauma.

**6. RELATIVES MUST BE THE FIRST CONSIDERATION WHEN OUT-OF-HOME CARE IS NECESSARY:**

The most familiar, most stable situation for a child/youth when they must be removed from their birth families is often with relatives. However, relatives must be assessed to determine their fitness before the child/youth is placed with them. The agency must examine child protective services and police records of all adults residing in the relative's home; in addition, the relatives' acceptance of family problems, and their ability to care, protect and cooperate with the agency are key factors. Despite these safeguards, it is critical that agencies implement expedited kinship placement protocols so that children can be placed with relatives immediately when out-of-home care is required. Plans for the support of relative caregivers are a must at initial placement TDM meetings.

**7. PARENT-CHILD CONTACT IS NECESSARY TO REMAIN CONNECTED:**

Regular and frequent visits, with the appropriate level of supervision if necessary, support the parent/child relationship and promote swift reunification. Parents may need encouragement to visit their children in settings that feel uncomfortable or institutional. The level of supervision at visits should be adjusted to reflect positive progress by parent(s). An Icebreaker-type meeting for parent(s) and caregivers should occur when a TDM results in out-of-home care; these meetings can often be coordinated with the first parent(s)/child visit.

**8. MOVES HURT KIDS:**

Everyone in the system must treat resource families with respect. Staff must keep them informed of family progress/change, invite them to meetings and offer training. Children and caregivers need care and support to promote stability. When problems threaten to disrupt an appropriate placement, a TDM must occur before any move to discuss whether additional services or supports can maintain the living

arrangement or if the child must move. If a child/youth must move, TDM participants can design a plan for maintaining future stability so as to avoid serial placements. Emergency situations that necessitate a move for a child/youth before a TDM meeting should be characterized by the existence of imminent risk. When an emergency removal occurs, the Placement Preservation/Disruption TDM is held within one working day to discuss how to ensure the best possible adjustment to the new care situation.

**9. REUNIFICATION SHOULD OCCUR AS SOON AS IT IS SAFE:**

A child/youth should be reunited as soon as it appears parent(s) can provide adequate care, protection and stability. The family's social worker schedules a Permanency Planning TDM to recommend reunification when the parents' progress indicates impending readiness to care for their child(ren) safely again. Such meetings should not be scheduled solely on the basis of statutory or court timelines; families progress at their own pace and TDM meetings should reflect this fact. Discussion at a Permanency TDM recommending reunification focuses on whether safety issues present when the child came into care have been eliminated or substantially reduced. The team must consider whether there is no/low risk of future serious abuse/neglect based upon the current assessment; evaluate the effectiveness of services and interventions; plan future services/supports; structure a plan for gradually increasing overnight visits, and discuss the many other issues related to the child/youth's transition from out-of-home care to parental care.

**10. AN ALTERNATIVE PERMANENT PLAN MUST BE MADE, IF REUNIFICATION IS NOT POSSIBLE WITHIN A REASONABLE TIME PERIOD:**

Children need defined, stable placement and custody plans. Ambiguous or undecided custody arrangements leave children vulnerable and living in uncertainty. Custody issues must be resolved to ensure a permanent family for a child/youth within reasonable timeframes. Permanency Planning TDM meetings are the settings for determination of whether reunification is an option; they are also the forum for the agency to decide upon other permanency options including a transfer of Legal Custody/Guardianship; pursuit of termination of parental rights/Permanent Custody; or Emancipation. Though not considered a true permanent plan, decisions to seek Planned Permanent Living Arrangements should also be made at a TDM.

**11. YOUTHS FACING 'AGING OUT' OR EMANCIPATON NEED GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT:**

Everyone needs family. Therefore, while assessing the adequacy of Independent Living Services to prepare older youths for self-sufficiency, a Permanency Planning TDM for youth 'aging out' of agency custody must also ensure the existence of supportive adult/family connections. The TDM team must explore aftercare options and contingency plans with youth, to minimize the chances of poor outcomes for youth leaving the child welfare system. For those youth unable to live independently due to serious developmental and/or emotional disabilities, living arrangements and legal responsibility must be concrete and complete prior to the termination of an agency's responsibilities.