

CHILD PROTECTION BEST PRACTICES BULLETIN

Innovative Strategies to Achieve Safety, Permanence, and Well-Being

BEST PRACTICE BULLETINS

- ADVANCE CALENDARING
- CONNECTING CHILDREN WITH INCARCERATED PARENTS
- EDUCATION ADVOCACY
- FAMILY ENGAGEMENT
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PRESERVING CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

WHAT IS *Preserving Cultural Connections*?

Culture is a defining feature of our identity and it is no different for the children and young people in our care. Culture contributes to how children and youth see themselves and the groups with whom they identify. Culture may be broadly defined as the sum total of ways of living embraced by groups of people. Such groups may be defined by race, ethnicity, economic class, language, disability, gender, sexual orientation, age, geography, immigration status, and so forth. Every cultural group has its own values, beliefs, and ways of living.

The observable aspects of culture -- such as food, clothing, celebrations, communication, religion, and language -- are only part of a person's cultural identity. The shared values, customs, and histories characteristic of culture shape the way a child thinks, behaves, and views the world. A shared cultural heritage bonds the members of the group together and creates a sense of identity and belonging through community acceptance.

Children and youth who enter the child welfare system often leave behind much of their cultural heritage and enter into new settings characterized by different values and customs. Cultural bonds are sometimes inadvertently broken, and the sense of identity and belonging and acceptance may be lost. Preserving cultural connections is about identifying aspects of culture important to the child or youth and aggressively working to keep connections that will maintain a sense of identity and belonging.

WHAT IS *Current Practice*?

Currently, there is no standardized statewide practice to preserve cultural connections for children. However, the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) requires that placements of Native American children and youth in foster care follow very specific preferences, starting with placement with a member of the Indian child's extended family, followed by placement with family from the child's tribe, and placement with another Indian family.

WHAT IS *Best Practice*?

Best practice requires judges, attorneys, caseworkers, service providers, child advocates, and others who work with children and families to thoroughly assess and identify those cultural factors critical to the child's sense of self and sense of belonging. Best practice also requires that child welfare professionals and advocates identify the individuals and community networks that need to be involved with the child or youth while he/she is in care in order to preserve cultural connections.

Best Practices cont...

Recent changes in federal law promote the involvement of the child's relatives in the child's life and makes it easier to place children in relative care. Maintaining the child's connection with birth relatives is an appropriate way to preserve the child's cultural connections. It is also important for children to maintain connections with their siblings. Sibling relationships are often the longest relationships in people's lives and uniquely sustain children's sense of both their personal and familial history.

There are no pre-established checklists that identify the critical elements of various cultural groups. These must be discovered through inquiry and a demonstration of empathy, compassion, and the highest level of cultural sensitivity. Some things that child welfare professionals and advocates can do are listed below. Safety, permanency, and well-being must be assured in all efforts to preserve cultural connections.

- Remember that the first and best way to preserve cultural connections is to preserve the child's connections with the child's biological family, including extended family, whenever possible and consistent with safety, permanency and well-being.
- Remember that cultures are defined by race, ethnicity, economic class, language, disability, gender, sexual orientation, age, geography, immigration status, and so forth.
- Persistently gather information about the defining characteristics of a child's culture; ask about friends and their backgrounds, school and neighborhood activities, celebrations and special events, language preferences, religious affiliations, and support networks.
- Speak freely with the child and parents about cultural issues; share information with caretakers, service providers, and others.
- Discover the people who share the child's culture and ensure that the child spends time with them; include family members, neighbors, and community members, as appropriate.
- If language is a defining feature of the child's culture, make sure that placement and service providers can speak the child's language.
- Where relevant, make books available about the child's culture of origin. Also, provide toys and games relevant to the child's culture of origin.
- Attend and acknowledge various celebrations and events within the child's culture of origin, if applicable.
- Respect the young person's choice of religious affiliation and help him/her participate accordingly.

WHAT IS *my* ROLE?

- As a JUDGE, you would inquire about the child's culture and the efforts that are being made to preserve cultural connections for the child or youth. You would ask about which aspects of race, ethnicity, economic class, language, and so forth are critical for the child and his or her sense of identity and belonging. You would also inquire about barriers and seek solutions to preserving cultural connections.
- As a CASEWORKER, you would gather information about the defining aspects of the child's culture. You would identify individuals and community networks that share the child's culture and can maintain relationships while the child is in care. You would engage foster parents, service providers, and others in efforts to preserve cultural connections. You would attempt to connect children with services in his or her native language. You would also document efforts to preserve cultural connections in the case record and in the treatment plan.
- As a CHILDREN'S COURT ATTORNEY, you would present recommendations from caseworkers about cultural connections in an informed manner to the Court.
- As a RESPONDENT ATTORNEY, YOUTH ATTORNEY, OR GAL, you would advocate for placement, service provision, and other activities that honor and preserve cultural connections for your client.
- As a CASA VOLUNTEER, you would speak with the child about his or her needs, hopes, and experiences in regards to the cultural connections that are important. You would also make recommendations to the Court in the child's best interests as they relate to preserving cultural connections.
- As a CRB MEMBER, you would inquire about the steps taken to preserve cultural connections. You would document your observations and recommendations in the CRB report.
- As a PARENT, you would help your caseworker identify and understand the cultural factors that are important to your family and to your child. You would talk to your caseworker or your attorney if you feel your child is being denied access to those cultural connections.
- As a FOSTER PARENT, you would work with the caseworker and the parents to preserve the child's cultural connections, including his or her choice of religious affiliation and participation in cultural traditions and events. You would help the child maintain a Life Book including photos and other items celebrating the child's culture.
- As a CHILD or YOUTH, you would let your caseworker, CASA, and attorney know what cultural factors are important to you and your family, including your religious affiliation, community affiliations or activities, cultural traditions and special events. You would let your caseworker, CASA, or attorney know if you feel you are being denied access to any of those cultural connections.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO PRESERVE CULTURAL CONNECTIONS?

What can be done to preserve connections with birth parents?

- Whenever possible, choose placements for foster children in close proximity to the child's birth parents.
- Encourage visitation and communication, even if the parent is incarcerated.
- Encourage parents to participate in treatment planning, mediation, and court hearings and related events.
- Consider open adoptions. (See Best Practice Bulletin Open Adoptions and Mediated Post Adoption Contact Agreements (PA CA).
- Promote positive relationships between foster youth and birth parents; avoid speaking negatively about birth parents in front of the foster youth.
- Keep foster youth informed of what is going on with his or her parents; always be honest.

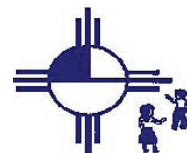
What can be done to preserve connections with siblings?

- Whenever possible, place siblings together in foster homes.
- Specifically address maintaining connections with siblings in case planning.
- Encourage visitation and communication.
- Keep foster youth informed of what is going on with his or her siblings; always be honest.
- If siblings have to be separated initially, work toward reuniting them.

What can be done to preserve connections with family members?

- Specifically address maintaining connections with grandparents, aunts and uncles, and other extended family in case planning whenever possible.
- Encourage and support visitation, including helping the foster youth participate in important family events.
- Inform grandparents of their rights, including their right to visitation. (For more information, see the booklet *Abuelos y Sus Nietos: Grandparents & Their Grandchildren*. Call Pegasus Legal Services for Children, 505-244-1101, or the Administrative Office of the Courts, 505-827-4800, and ask for a copy.)
- Keep foster youth informed of what is going on with his or her extended family; always be honest.

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