

Achieving and Maintaining Permanence Is Key to Well-being and Mental Health

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Welcome back. This lesson is: Achieving and Maintaining Permanence Is Key to Well-Being and Mental Health. This lesson will focus on the urgent need for permanence among children and youth who cannot be raised by their birth parents and the impact of not having family permanence on their well-being and mental health.

1.2 Section 1: Lesson Objectives

The objectives for this lesson are:

- To understand the negative impact of impermanence on mental health and adjustment in adoptive and guardianship families, and
- To integrate this understanding into the foundation of your practice with children, youth, and families

2. Permanency

2.1 Permanency

Let's first look at the role of permanency in your work with children and youth.

2.2 What is Permanency?

Let's define family permanence. Click each image to reveal the qualities of an enduring family relationship that reflects family permanence.

1. Is safe and meant to last a lifetime
2. Offers the legal rights and social status of full family membership
3. Provides for physical, emotional, social, cognitive, and spiritual well-being
4. Assures lifelong connections to extended family, siblings, other significant adults, family history and traditions, tribal membership, heritage, community, religion, and language

Definition courtesy of Casey Family Services

2.3 Children's Urgent Need for Permanence

U.S. families adopt at least twice as many children from the foster care system as the number of infant and intercountry adoptions combined.

Whether children have experienced foster care in the U.S. or institutional care in other countries, achieving permanence and family integration are intrinsically tied with their psychological safety, sense of connection, and behavior. These factors can influence parents' attitudes toward, and commitment to, their child.

Your understanding of these impacts should shape your assessment and treatment of the children, youth, and families with whom you work.

2.4 Children's Psychological Needs

As you know, beyond basic needs, such as food, shelter, and physical safety, every child and youth needs a secure relationship with a primary caregiver. Their emotional security is built upon enduring family relationships with consistent, positive parenting.

Children and youth also need connections to their past through stories of family history, heritage, community, tribe, or faith. It is these connections that influence their positive identity development. And finally, they need hope for the future, one that includes healthy relationships, opportunities to learn and grow, and aspirations for the future.

2.5 The Need for Family Permanence

As discussed in the guiding principles lesson, healing from trauma, loss, and insecure attachment happens best within the context of a consistent, supportive, and nurturing family. For most children and youth, this is best achieved in their birth family, or with their kin. When that is not possible, finding a permanent family is in the child's or youth's best interest.

In the U.S., the child welfare system is obligated by policy and ethical practice to strive to achieve permanency, safety, and well-being through adoption or guardianship for children and youth who cannot safely grow up in their birth families. This does not always happen, however, thereby leaving youth at risk.

In other parts of the world, the policies may not be as well-defined, and many children and youth are at-risk and in institutional care.

Let's take a deeper look at the urgent need for family permanence; what is it and why is it so important?

2.6 Different Kinds of Permanence

There are different kinds of permanence, all of which are important for children and youth: legal, relational, and psychological. Click each image to learn more.

1. Legal: Children and youth may achieve permanence through adoption, customary adoption, or guardianship. This requires approval by federal or tribal courts.
2. Relational: Relational permanence is having lifelong connections to caring adults, including at least one adult who will provide a permanent, parent-like connection. This includes a sense of belonging, feeling loved, and valued.
3. Psychological: Psychological permanence is the youth's sense of psychological and emotional security, and a belief that the supportive relationship will endure, and that their family will always be there for them unconditionally.

3. Impact of Impermanency

3.1 Impact of Impermanency

Our goal is for children and youth to have all three types of permanence: legal, relational, and psychological, and the outcomes for them when they don't are significant. Now, let's explore how a lack of permanency impacts children and youth in adoption and guardianship families.

3.2 Life Without a Family Video

Have you ever contemplated what it is like for youth to grow up without a permanent family? Let's listen to Jeremy's vivid description of what this was like for him. When this DVD was made, he was still in foster care while he attended college.

[Video Transcript]

JEREMY: I know that my friends who have families, they talk about how great it is to see their grandparents and their aunts and uncles. And I enjoy the time I spend with my foster parents, aunts and uncles. And to have the ability to connect to my own family, I don't know how that would feel. I think I'm missing something. Definitely always feel like there's something I'm missing out on.

Even though my friends' parents and family is very supportive, and that's awesome and really nice of them but it's taxing to know that I have a family that I don't know. That's troublesome.

So yeah, I think it will continue to affect me. Something that I'll probably have to deal with my whole life.

[End of Video]

Video obtained from Family Connections DVD.

3.3 Life in an Orphanage

Now, let's hear Sharmila Ashraf's description of her life in an orphanage in India.

Page 1: *My mom, dad, and twin sister committed suicide in 1992. I was saved by my extended family, only to get abandoned later. I was disowned, not because two of the wealthiest families in the city couldn't raise me, but because I was a curse for their reputation. My mom and dad were not married; I was an illegitimate child. Fast forward a few months: One fine day, I woke up at a children's home. Boom, I was an orphan.*

Page 2: *So how is it like to grow up as an orphan? There was very little caring. Every time I tried to replace my family members with the attenders, I failed terribly. Later, when I was around 5 years old, I realized that family can never be replaced.*

Page 3: *We always got old and torn stuff to wear and play. No one ever donates fresh clothes or toys to orphaned children. 'Til 6 years of age, I had never worn a dress of my size, always oversized. In less than 4 years of age, we all learned to get cleaned up, take a bath, and get dressed properly, because, unlike other kids, no one else would do it for us.*

3.4 Life without a Family Exercise

Jeremy's words, "It's taxing to know I have a family I don't know," and Sharmila's words, "Every time I tried to replace my family members with the attenders," underscore the insurmountable impact of loss. Imagine what it would be like to go through much of your childhood into adulthood with no parents, no grandparents, siblings, or other extended family.

Take a minute to type the names of three people whom you would consider most important in providing emotional support to you. Think about what you received from each of them.

Now, click two of these people and imagine how it would feel if you had lost them from your life.

3.5 Life Without a Family Reflection

How would your life be different without these connections?

Type your answer in the space provided.

3.6 Life Without a Family Response

Research documents the following outcomes associated with impermanence:

- Lacking a sense of safety and belonging.
- Heightened anxiety.
- Low self-esteem.
- Difficulties forming attachments.
- Challenges in making transitions.
- Developmental delays.
- Confused identities.
- Troubling behaviors.
- Mental health challenges.

These factors are common in children and youth who are in care indefinitely. As we have said, the impact has profound and lifelong implications for children's mental health.

3.7 Shane's Impact of Impermanence

Think about these characteristics as you listen to Shane talk about his life in the foster care system.

[Video Transcript]

SHANE: I came into foster care because my mom was 15 years old when she gave birth to me. And about several years later, she had my little brother. And she left me for days unnumbered to take care of my brother because she walked out and left us as a result of her addiction to heroin.

I know my mom loved me very much because, when I came into foster care, they say that I had a very large vocabulary, and you don't develop that on your own. It's obvious that my mother spent a lot of time with me in spite of her drug addiction.

One of the things that was really sad, though, is that, as a result of being in foster care, we moved around a lot. We were moved from home to home and rejected quite a bit. I still live a lot with that pain. The thought of moving from house to house and going through that, whenever I think of those times, I often think about the numbers of children who still go through that. I think about it because of how it affects me today in my relationships and how I view and approach life, the passion that I bring to the things that matter most to me.

I also remember the hope that I had for the many times that families came forward, and there was interest expressed in possibly my brother and I getting adopted. And I remember the excitement that people expressed when they saw us, and they thought that we were cute little boys, while we were cute, when we were 12 and 9 years old. And I remember the things that they would say about how we looked like this relative or looked like that relative and how that would just give me so much encouragement and hope because I thought I might get my chance at a family. I remember the disappointments when it didn't happen.

I often wondered why, why when I was placed in a home, someone might send me back because maybe I wasn't the kind of kid that might tell the truth all the time, or I was a kid who stole things from time to time, or I would act out in different ways. And I felt bad because when I would get kicked out of the home, I would look at my little brother and realize that it was often my fault that we were being thrown out of a home. And those feelings, again, of moving from place to place and feeling a bit unsettled made it very hard for me to trust people.

And so I guess as I went through my life growing up and then eventually having to be separated from my brother because we wanted to make sure he had the best chance of getting a family. And ultimately, fortunately, he did. My brother ultimately did get adopted, and it hurt him that we couldn't be adopted together. He's a grown man now, and he wonders, even as a grown man, why was he left? While he had the satisfaction of getting a home, he feels that he was left.

So there was a price paid that we had to be separated, even though he had a family. I went through the rest of my life feeling as if I wasn't quite good enough, feeling that there was something really wrong with me because I never did get a family. And I know that there are hundreds of children out there, hundreds of thousands of children out there, who beat themselves up because they really wonder why aren't they good enough to get a home, something that every child deserves. It's a basic human right for children to have childhoods, to not have to worry and wonder why don't they have family, why don't they have a mom and a dad or an aunt and an uncle, some kind of security of family so that they can thrive and grow up to be the best kind of people that they can be.

[End of Video]

Video obtained from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76LqMnBZV-0&t=303s>.

3.8 Impact of Impermanence on Shane's Adjustment Reflection

Which impacts of impermanence did Shane experience? Check all that apply.

- Lacking a sense of safety and connection
- Heightened anxiety
- Low self-esteem
- Difficulties forming attachments
- Challenges in making transitions
- Developmental delays
- Troubling behaviors
- Mental health challenges

3.9 Impact of Impermanence on Shane's Adjustment Response

Did you identify the following?

- Lacking a sense of safety and connection
- Heightened anxiety
- Low self-esteem
- Difficulties forming attachments
- Challenges in making transitions
- Troubling behaviors

From hearing Shane's story, we can tell that impermanency impacted him in significant ways.

3.10 Area of Disadvantage Evidenced Through Research

Youth who don't experience family permanence face daunting risks, challenges, uncertainties and worries as they navigate life.

Here are some of the many areas in which these young adults are disadvantaged:

- 1 in 4 will become homeless between ages 19 and 21.
- Fifty-seven percent will be employed at age 21.
- 1 in 5 will become incarcerated by age 21.
- 1 in 4 will become a parent between ages 19 and 21.
- 1 in 4 will experience PTSD.

For these reasons, it is critically important for you to support achieving and maintaining all forms of permanence for youth of all ages.

4. Adoption As A Permanency Option

4.1 Adoption As A Permanency Option

Now, let's focus on how research supports adoption and guardianship as permanency options.

4.2 Benefits of Adoption As A Permanency Option

Every child deserves a permanent family. Research supports four primary benefits of adoption, including customary or tribal adoption, over other forms of care. Click each box to learn the benefits.

Resiliency: Adoption offers children and youth optimal potential for resiliency, particularly when adopted at younger ages. Their best prospects for maximizing healing from early deprivation and trauma, as well as realizing their developmental potential, come from living in families that provide a healing environment and remain committed to them in the face of challenges.

Emotional Security: Adoption promotes children’s and youth’s emotional security, sense of mattering, and general well-being. The lack of continuity in caregivers that many children experience undermines the ability of children to develop a secure attachment and a sense of emotional security. Adoption offers the opportunity for secure attachment and the consistent, nurturing environment needed to build trust and security.

Family and Support: Adoption offers lifelong family and tribal community support in transitioning to adulthood. Family connections beyond age 18 means sustained emotional support and connection, a home to return to on holidays, siblings who typically are the longest relationships sustained in their lifetimes, parents to consult with on difficult decisions, and extended families for generations to come.

Stability: Adoption offers stability, the lifelong commitment, connection, and belonging needed by children and youth to develop a safe base from which to experience the world.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Wrapping Up

The need for sustaining permanency is very real. Your understanding of the implications of impermanence and its impact on youths’ complex mental health needs will improve their mental health outcomes. As a mental health professional, you serve as a bridge to the critical healing that children and youth so urgently need to counter the impact of their life experiences.

5.2 Your Journal

Please click on the journal page to write down your reflections on this lesson.

5.3 Journal Reflection

Reflecting on this lesson, what are your key takeaways and how might you apply these in your practice?

5.4 Journal Response

Click the “Print Results” button to print and save your answers.

5.5 Conclusion

Congratulations! You have completed this lesson, Achieving and Maintaining Permanence is Key to Well-Being and Mental Health.

In the next lesson, we will explore the changing policies and practices related to adoption and guardianship.