THE LANGUAGE OF CHILD WELFARE: A List of Generic Definitions of Commonly Used Words

Adoption

*Adoption* is a judicial process during which the legal rights of biological parents towards their child are terminated and new rights are created between the adoptive parent(s) and the child, creating a legal relationship between individuals who are not necessarily naturally related by birth. Adoption provides children with a sense of belonging, and the love, nurturance, and stability that promotes their well-being.

Family Reunification

The term, *family reunification*, refers to the safe return of children to the custody of their biological parent(s), after they have been removed from their family home and placed in foster care.

Guardianship

Legal *guardianship* gives the caretaker permanent custody of the child with the authority to make parental decisions regarding the care and control of the child without the involvement of the child welfare system. Guardianship does not require termination of parental rights, as is required for an adoption. This means that although the guardian has custody and is responsible for raising the child, the parents are still the child's legal parents; however, they are no longer involved in the day-to-day decision making concerning the custody, care and control of the child. In some instances, a continued biological parent-child relationship continues through visitation.

Kinship Care or Relative Care

*Kinship care* is the full time care, control and protection of children by relatives, godparents, stepparents, or any adult who has a kinship bond with a child. It allows a child to live in a family environment that is

respectful of cultural values. Research suggests that kinship care offers greater stability for children who are living with their relatives.

**Permanence**
The goal for all children in the child welfare system is *permanence*. *Permanence* is generally defined as the timely achievement of a safe, loving, stable, nurturing home for all children in out-of-home care. According to the Child Welfare Information Gateway, the concept of permanency is rooted in values that include the primacy of family, the significance of biological connections, and the importance of the parent-child attachment and bond. These values are largely based on the idea that children grow up best in nurturing, stable families. As such, foster care is recognized as a temporary measure aimed at protecting children until permanence is achieved.


Once children are placed in out-of-home care, regularly scheduled review hearings (usually every 6 months) are held by juvenile and family court to review the family’s progress toward satisfying the tasks, goals and outcomes of the *service agreement*. *Permanency* can be achieved by returning children to their biological family, placement in legal guardianships, or through adoption.

**Reasonable Efforts**
*Reasonable efforts* refer to activities of State social service agencies that aim to provide the assistance and supportive services needed to 1) preserve or keep families together; and 2) reunify families, if there has been a separation due to a finding of abuse or neglect. Generally, children are removed from the care of their biological families only when *reasonable efforts* to keep them safe at home are unsuccessful. *Reasonable efforts* to place a child for adoption or with a legal guardian may be made concurrently with reasonable efforts towards reunification of children with their families. As such, when *reasonable efforts* to reunify the family are unsuccessful, State social service agencies have

completed the necessary requirements to achieve permanence for the child through legal guardianship or adoption within the predetermined timeframe established by ASFA.

*Case Plan*

The term *case plan* (also referred to as the service, family and/or case plan) refers to a specific casework document that is developed between the CPS caseworker and the family. The service agreement outlines the tasks, goals, and outcomes that parents must achieve to reduce the risk of child maltreatment in the home before family reunification can be given consideration. Based on the service agreement, CPS caseworker’s evaluate or measure changes in family behaviors and living conditions to determines case closure.

*Termination of Parental Rights*

In an effort to achieve permanence for children who are placed in out-of-home care, including foster care, Courts review the status of children to ensure the timely resolution of the situation or circumstances that caused the child to be placed in out-of-home care. When the Court determines that children cannot be reunified with their biological parents, their birth parents' rights must be terminated before the child can be freed for adoption. Termination of parental rights can be done voluntarily or involuntarily. Voluntary termination happens when parents agree to legally end their relationship with their biological child(ren). Involuntary termination happens when Courts and judges make decisions about termination of parental rights based on State laws that detail the specific circumstances that must exist before a court may legally terminate the parent-child relationship.