

PLACEMENT STABILITY

OVERVIEW

Placement stability is one of the most important factors in helping children in foster care experience safety, healing, and belonging. Stable placements create the conditions for children to build secure relationships, develop trust, and experience the consistency they need to thrive. Whenever possible, a child's first placement should be the best placement and, ideally, the only placement.

Every placement move can be stressful and traumatic. For infants and young children in particular, repeated disruptions may interfere with attachment, brain development, and a child's overall sense of safety in the world. Whenever possible, children should remain connected to their siblings, families, and communities. Placement with kin can be a powerful source of stability and continuity, helping children preserve important relationships, maintain a sense of identity, and experience fewer disruptions. Greater placement stability is also associated with stronger educational outcomes, fewer behavioral concerns, and increased resilience.

Research shows that repeated moves can undermine permanency and make it harder for children to achieve lasting, positive outcomes. Thoughtful permanency planning helps children reunify or reach another safe, stable home as quickly as possible, reducing time in care and the likelihood of additional placement changes. CASA volunteers are in a unique position to notice instability early, elevate the child's experience, and advocate for thoughtful decisions that protect relationships and reduce harm. Staying informed about proposed moves and responding quickly when concerns arise are essential parts of that role.



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WHAT THE LAW REQUIRES

Understanding the legal requirements around placement changes equips advocates to monitor compliance, respond quickly when moves are proposed, and use court processes effectively on behalf of the child.

NOTICE

- At least 5 days before any placement change, DFCS must notify the court, a child age 14 or older, the parent, guardian, or legal custodian, the person or agency with physical custody, the child's attorney, the GAL, and any other attorney of record of the change in the child's placement location.
- If the child's health or welfare may be endangered by delaying the move, the court and all attorneys of record must be notified within 24 hours after the placement change.

REQUEST FOR HEARING

- A child age 14 or older, the parent, guardian, or legal custodian, the person or agency with physical custody, the child's attorney, the GAL (CASA), and any other attorney of record may request a hearing on the child's case plan or permanency plan so the court can consider the placement change and any resulting revisions.
- The hearing must be held within 5 days of receiving notice of the placement change and before the change occurs, unless delay would endanger the child's health or welfare.

COURT FINDINGS

- At the hearing, the court reviews DFCS's case plan and permanency plan recommendations, including any proposed placement change, and makes findings of fact when deciding whether to accept or reject those recommendations. The court must specifically consider any objections filed and any relevant evidence, including evidence from the child, foster parent, relative, or caregiver.
- If the court rejects DFCS's recommendations, it must show that those recommendations were considered and explain why they were not followed.
- If the court finds that the child has lived in a stable home with the current caregivers for the past 12 months and that removal would harm the child's emotional well-being, the court may presume that remaining with the current caregivers is in the child's best interests. In that situation, the court must also find that a placement change would reflect DFCS's failure to make reasonable efforts to finalize the permanency plan then in effect. This presumption does not prevent the child from being returned to a parent, guardian, or legal custodian.
- The court may order DFCS to develop a new case plan and permanency plan recommendation, including a new placement recommendation within DFCS's available resources, or enter another order related to placement or custody outside the department, so long as the court finds it is in the child's best interests and consistent with the policy favoring stable placements. Placement or a change in legal custody outside DFCS relieves DFCS of further responsibility, except for court-ordered services to support ongoing reunification efforts when appropriate.



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CASA's role is to monitor stability, identify concerns early, and advocate for decisions that prioritize the child's connections, continuity, and long-term well-being.

ADVOCACY FOR PLACEMENT STABILITY

Placement decisions have lasting consequences for children's development, relationships, and permanency. Georgia law balances the priority of kinship placements against the child's need for placement stability, attachment, and connections. Relatives who have been notified, but do not come forward within 6 months of notice and take active steps to serve as a resource and placement for the child may be excused from consideration by the court and lose priority over other potential permanent placements. CASA's role is to monitor stability, identify concerns early, and advocate for decisions that prioritize the child's connections, continuity, and long-term well-being.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Do the caregivers have the information they need about the child and know how to access practical supports such as respite, medical care, transportation, and other services that can help sustain the placement?
- Would a proposed placement move affect the child's school stability, relationships, routines, and sense of connection?
- Would the proposed placement be a good fit for the child's individual needs, temperament, and existing connections?
- What is the proximity of the proposed placement to parents, siblings, relatives, school, and community? Will it support visitation, reunification, and belonging?
- Is the proposed placement move a move away from permanency?



PRACTICE POINTS

- Encourage placement with relatives whenever possible and appropriate, recognizing the value of familiar relationships, lifelong connections, and a sense of urgency for familial priority.
- Help ensure the child's physical health, mental health, development, cognition, and other areas of functioning are fully assessed so placement decisions are informed by a clear understanding of the child's needs.
- Visit the child and caregiver regularly in the home to monitor adjustment, build trust, and identify supports or concerns early.
- If a caregiver expresses doubt or concerns about remaining a placement, request an FTM to discuss concerns and needs.

- Support front-line case managers and recognize that changes in staff can be disruptive for children and families. When transitions occur, proactively share relevant information and case context to help promote continuity.
- Look closely at lateral moves, and caution against moves away from permanency, such as from a relative placement to a non-relative placement or from a family foster home to congregate care.
- Remember that if a child has been with a caregiver for 12 months, unless the child is going to be moved to reunify, remaining in that placement is presumably in their best interests.
- Request a hearing if a proposed placement is not in the child's best interest and inform the court about how it would affect the child's school stability, relationships, routines, and connections.
- Advocate for a thoughtful transition period whenever possible to reduce trauma and minimize unnecessary disruption to relationships, school progress, and important milestones.
- Connect with the child before any proposed placement change and again soon after a move to understand the child's experience, concerns, and wishes.
- Advocate for timely reunification and permanency through regular reviews, strong participation in Family Team Meetings and Permanency Roundtables, and ongoing attention to what will best support stability.
- Submit recommendations about placement and the child's adjustment in your CASA report; support those recommendations with best-interest factors, and be prepared to speak clearly about them in court.

A NOTE ABOUT TEMPORARY ABSENCES:

A placement change does not include a temporary absence from the placement, such as visitation with a friend, sibling, relative, or other caretaker; a pre-placement visit to a potential foster or adoptive placement; hospitalization for medical care, an acute psychiatric episode, or diagnosis; respite care; day or overnight camp; temporary travel with the foster family or another DFCS-approved person or group; a trial home visit with the court's permission; or a runaway episode. If CASA has concerns about the child participating in any temporary absence, those concerns should be raised with DFCS and the child's attorney.
