

Title/Status-	Planning & Preparing for Separation at Birth and of Older Children
New Document or Revised	New
Responsible Head of Service	Safeguarding, Improvement & Quality Assurance

Leicestershire Procedure for Planning & Preparing for Separation at Birth and of Older Children

Applies to- Children in Particular Circumstances

Planning & Preparing for Separation at Birth & of Older Children

This resource has been developed to provide guidance to practitioners where a decision has been made to separate either a baby at birth or child from their parent/s. The aim is to provide support to minimise the trauma of separation and keep reunification in mind.

When Should this Guidance be Used?

Where the plan is for separation, this guidance should be referred to in the following circumstances:

- Pre-birth planning meeting and any discharge planning meetings.
- At the First Review Child Protection Conference
- Where the plan is twin tracking
- During the PLO process
- Family Network Meetings

NB In the event of either parent being a care leaver, the allocated worker for the child/unborn baby should liaise with the parent's personal advisor to see how they may support with the plan.

Impact of Separation

The separation of an infant at birth from his or her mother, father and the wider family, is an acutely distressing experience for all concerned including professionals involved with the family.

According to the thematic analysis around the experiences of mother's that have their baby removed at birth, there is often no acknowledgment from society of their loss and the subsequent intense grief symptoms they may experience (Marsh et al, 2015).

Analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews with 38 mothers who had experienced removal at birth identified four common themes: isolation and unacknowledged support needs; shame, stigma and the failure of others to acknowledge their maternal identity; acute trauma, immediate downturn and disenfranchised grief following infant removal; and strategies to mitigate their pain and grief.

Research published in 2021 *Up Against it, Understanding Fathers' Repeat Appearance in Local Authority Care Proceedings* found that fathers were recorded, and named as a party to the proceedings, in 80% of cases with 20% fathers missing. Fathers described deep and long-lasting emotional pain, grief and shame following the loss of children and a desire to play some ongoing parenting role.

The findings from these studies illustrate the importance of sensitive attuned practice when a baby and mother are separated at birth due to safeguarding concerns. In keeping with the existing literature regarding parents who have experienced state-ordered child removal, the women's accounts in this study demonstrate the complexity of the psychological task as they attempt to negotiate their separation from their baby and the associated stigma and shame. The concept of disenfranchised grief is a useful framework for helping us to understand the complexity of the loss and the challenges in holding on to a 'compromised' maternal identity.

Disenfranchised grief is when a parent incurs a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported Doka, 1989

The findings also point to the important part that capturing early experiences and memories through objects may play in supporting women through this journey, both to keep connection to the baby and engagement in the immediate period following separation and, in the longer term, to support loss and grief work should a permanent separation be ordered by the court.

Working with Fathers & Partners

Fathers play an essential role in their child's development. Research shows that outcomes for children improve when they have high-quality relationships and safe, healthy interactions with their fathers (including non-biological and non-resident fathers). As with mothers it is important that they are included in discussions around bonding, separation how they would like this to happen and how they want memories to be captured.

Oxytocin, often called the 'hormone of attachment' has been suggested as playing an important role in early-life nurturing and resulting social bonding. Oxytocin plays an important role in the development of attachment between infants and parents through early contact and interaction.

After the birth skin-to-skin contact with both parents helps newborns adjust to life outside the womb, it also triggers oxytocin release which promotes the bonding process. The hormonal release during skin-to-skin contact helps fathers continue to

get close to their baby in the months after the birth, as well as helping to reduce stress.

Over the first six months following childbirth, men have elevated levels of *oxytocin*—a hormone that drives fathers to seek physical contact with their infants and helps fathers feel emotionally close to them. Importantly, fathers' bodies produce more oxytocin during play with their infants.

Preserving Connections

Transitional objects can help mothers come to terms with the permanent loss of a baby and are a means of keeping maternal identity alive and connecting with an infant who might eventually return home.

Preserving connections and motivation post separation until the final court order has been granted, is really important as separation is an interim measure. It will be at least six months before care proceedings are concluded, at the end of which approximately 15 per cent of separated infants will return to birth parents on supervision orders (Broadhurst et al.,2018). Others, whilst subject to a care order, may remain with or be returned to their parents 'care. It is therefore of great importance to ensure that mothers and fathers have every opportunity to bond with the baby and to hold on to their parental identities during this interim phase.

The importance of transitional objects and items in parents 'management of their grief, evident in the findings, resonate with the broader literature on peri-natal loss (McGrath-Lone & Ott,2022). Gibson (2004) discusses in adoption research how, just as children use transitional objects such as teddy bears and blankets to help them negotiate the process of becoming separated from their parents, so those who grieve may similarly use objects to negotiate the process of separating themselves from their child. Clothing can be of particular symbolic significance due to the evocation of smell as well as image.

Gathering such carefully chosen items convey empathy and preserve a connection between parents and their baby, but they may also serve as important objects if, following care proceedings, there is a permanent separation. The items may become sources of memories and other keepsakes for both parents and child and may support loss and grief processing and help with future life story and narrative identity work with children and adults (Geddes,2021; Watson et al.,2020).

What Can Help?

- Planning for delivery, who will be there with them during the delivery. Women said they felt reassured to know they would not be alone for the birth. With so much out of her control, doing a birth plan and thinking about their wishes could be empowering. What will fathers role in the birth be?

- To bond or not to bond? For some parents it can help to think about giving their baby a good start others may not want to talk about the separation and this should be respected this.
- Knowing what would happen and how long they will have with their baby and when they will see them again. Have a conversation with the foster carer(s) about providing the parents with updates on how their baby is. Are they able to meet the foster carers beforehand.

What Can We Do?

- Promote the parent's parental identity and capture early memories whilst still with their baby.
- Engage parents in a conversation about how they want to connect with their baby, manage the separation and who will be providing them with support afterwards.
- Is there the opportunity for the parents to meet with foster carers before their baby is placed, if not how can information be shared, i.e., pictures of the carer(s) and where the baby will sleep. Allow the parent to share how their baby likes to be held, fed etc.
- Facilitate a family network meeting to look at what support the network can provide the parents in the maternity setting and on returning home.
- Talk with the parents about what they would like to do with the things that they have at home that they have brought in preparation for the baby, are there things that they would like their baby to take with them?
- Offer an opportunity for psychological connection when their baby is physically absent and no longer in their care. For example, you might want to provide a baby first book—one for each parent and baby allowing the parents to capture and also share with the foster or kinship carer the baby's early days of life whilst in their care. This both offers an opportunity for the parents to convey their own knowledge and expertise in relation to their baby and also ensures that this is shared with the alternative care giver, thus creating an opportunity to build a relationship. The foster carer or kinship carer is subsequently encouraged to update the book and share this with the parents at family time. The foster carer or kinship carer is subsequently encouraged to update the book and share this with the parents at family time, so they remain involved in their baby's developmental journey.
- You could get a small children's book and encourage the parents to record their voice reading the story on a memory card. This can be played to offer the baby the additional comfort of their mother/father's voice.
- The parents may want to write a letter or poem to their baby or knit or make something for their baby to take with them.
- The parents may want to write a letter to the foster carers about how their baby liked to be held and fed.

- The parents may want to read something to their baby before saying goodbye.
- Matching items for the parents and baby such as a soft toy (an elephant chosen because ('they never forget') and a baby blanket provide a sensory connection. Chosen for their tactile quality and their ability to hold the scent of the other, the items can be swapped at contact sessions and may help settle the baby in their alternative placement as well as provide comfort to the mother. Such sensory stimulation may be of particular importance for women who wish to continue breastfeeding.
- Having a photo frame to encourage a photographic keepsake and a box to hold a lock of the baby's hair.

Midwifery

You might want include items to support midwives 'conversations regarding memory-making activities in the baby's first few days whilst still in the maternity unit. Are they able to produce baby and mother's hand and footprints, think about keeping the cot cards and ankle and wrist name bracelets. Each of these items are typically preserved by any new parents, providing opportunities to capture those precious early moments of their baby's life; however, opportunities to make memories in this way can be overshadowed by the demands of a complex legal process with which this group of parents must engage.

Whilst at this stage, memory-making may be important because it represents normal parental activities', these items may take on a new significance if mother and baby are separated. As Lavelle (2020) describes objects that have been physically close to the baby speak of intimacy and 'enable a moment of the past to manifest in the present'. For parents at risk of permanent separation, these manifestations of their baby whilst physically apart may prove important in maintaining motivation to continue engagement with both the legal process and support services. In the absence of the physical presence of their baby and at a time of acute psychological distress, these items become representations of the baby and important testaments to the parental identity (Geddes,2021).

Liaise with midwifery to see if there is the possibility of having a private room off the ward.

Planning for Separation

Work with the parents on how separation will happen do they want to leave the room first or do they want to be present. What would they like their baby to wear?

Support with breastfeeding or expressing if this is the mother's choice, plan for how this will be managed going forward.

How will the parent get home from the hospital, who will be there with them, who will be providing them support, what would they like to do with items they may have brought in preparation for their baby?

Provide a list of national and local organisations and their contact numbers that may provide the parent with support.

Stress the importance of attending their post-natal appointments.

Ensure that they are clear about court dates and hearings who will be supporting them to attend?

Separation of Older Children

Considering that children who enter the child welfare system may have already experienced trauma, it is especially important that they not be further traumatized by the system that seeks to help them. The potential for children to be traumatized during the process of removal is high, as these processes often involve conflictual interactions between professionals and family members and can evoke fear, shock, confusion, loss of control, resistance, and hostility. In the process of initial placement, children are removed from familiar surroundings and lose everything they are used to and comfortable with.

Irrespective of when children are removed from the care of their birth parents, children who remain in out-of-home care can experience difficulties in the areas of self-worth, identity, and belongingness which, in turn, can result in complex and challenging relational behaviour and may question who they are and where they belong.

Where it is possible and safe to do so, we need to meaningfully engage birth parents in recognition of their enduring role and importance in the life of the child and support the maintenance of best connections between the children and their birth parents/family.

The Importance of Maintaining Relationships with Brothers & Sisters

'Sibling relationships are likely to last a lifetime and can be an integral part of a child's sense of identity, while potentially also providing support, companionship, continuity, annoyance, competition and conflict. Edwards et al 2005. Relationships with brothers and sisters may have provided comfort and support for children when home circumstances were difficult. Maintaining these relationships can provide a source of continuity for children and help to mitigate some of the loss experienced.

Even when a child is separated from siblings, sibling contact can help provide links to a child's birth family. It can provide children with a sense of belonging and a

shared history, a chance to identify biological connection and likeness. Siblings can continue to be a source of support in adult life.

Trauma Informed Practice Strategies (TIPS)

Slow down, plan out investigations and removals.

- Let the family know an assessment is going on, that removal is a possibility.
- Suggest they keep a school aged child at home, so the child doesn't have to be interviewed at school.
- Work with the parents to identify support individuals for their children during the assessment and/or for potential carers– relatives, friends, etc. Use genograms and eco-maps to help identify familiar adults.
- Ask the parent and the child - Who does this child know and trust?
- If possible, identify alternative carers before removal.
- If the child needs to wait at the office while foster carers are found, try to find a comfortable place for them to wait, away from phone conversations with prospective carers (to avoid hearing rejections), and perhaps with something to do to entertain themselves.
- Ask the child if they are hungry or thirsty. Provide comfort food. Ask them what they would like.
- Take time to help the child transition into the foster home. The child may have connected to you during the removal. They have already had one abrupt separation. It may be reassuring to the child to know that the worker knows the people and place where they will be staying. If possible a constant in the child's life until visits with parents start.
- Provide the child with information (including photos) about foster carers in advance and arrange pre-visit if possible. This helps restore a sense of predictability for children, which is important in the aftermath of trauma.
- Empathize, connect, and try to understand the child's perspective. Be open to listening if they want to talk. Acknowledge their feelings and the difficulty of what they are going through. Acknowledge their love for their parents and their parents love for them.
- Provide information to the child: Explain what is happening. Tell them where they are going, where their brothers and sister are going. Assure them that this is not their fault.
- Assure them that they are safe and will be cared for.
- Assure them that their brothers and sisters, if separated, are safe and will be cared for.
- Don't make promises you can't keep.
- Provide the carers with medical conditions, allergies, medications, known behavioural and emotional issues, important people, anything that will help them to understand the child and to help them feel safe and comfortable.

Recognize that you may not have the power to alleviate the child's distress, but you can minimize the trauma. Prepare trauma-informed responses to typical child questions, based on their developmental stage:

- Why can't I stay with my parents?
- When can I see my parents again?
- When will I see my brother or sister again?
- How long will I be in foster care?
- Why is this happening?
- I don't understand what is happening.

Engage the Parents in Helping the Child

- Engage the parent in helping the child, support the parents to consider and focus on the child's well-being. Ask them how their child looks to them, how they think they are doing. When possible, allow the parent to talk to the child to reassure them. If the child is being removed, allow the parent to gather together some of the child's belongings and to say good-bye.
- Provide sensory comfort, familiarity, help with settling in.
- Ask the parent, or the child, to gather together some familiar things before leaving.
- If picking a child up from school to, if possible, create a chance for the child to go home and pick up some things from home. Perhaps a relative or friend could meet them there or go with them to help pack some belonging.
- Ask the parent and the child about medical conditions, allergies, medications.
- Especially for babies and very young children, ask the parent for information about feeding, schedules, routines.
- Provide birthparents with information about the out-of-home caregiver at the time of placement to help allay parents' fears and develop a relationship between birthparents and foster carers.
- Create an opportunity for the birth family and out-of-home caregiver to meet as soon as possible, to share information about the child and began to form partnership to enhance psychological safety and well-being of the child. Consider creating an agreement between them on how they will communicate and work together for the child.
- Create an opportunity for the birth parents to talk with the child shortly after their child has moved (within 24 hours) when appropriate.

Support Child's Relationships & Family Connections

- Visitation is extremely important. In addition to their own trauma of being separated, children may worry about the safety and wellbeing of their brothers and sisters and other family members from whom they are separated. Seeing that they are OK can ease that worry.

- If siblings are placed separately, arrange for sibling visits ASAP, and/or ask foster parents to allow and arrange for sibling family time.
- Set up visitation between child and parents as soon as possible.
- Notify the child's school so they can be supportive, if the child remains in the school, or to provide classmates the opportunity for closure or continued connection if the child is to attend a different school.
- Allow the child to resume attending school as soon as possible. School may have been the one place where they felt safe.

Importance of Life Story Work

Children who live with birth family are regularly reminded of anecdotes, significant memories which are not so readily available for looked after children and those who are adopted. These memories and understanding of events help children and young people develop a sense of their own identity and make sense of the past. Without it they may become confused, angry, and often develop an inaccurate version of events all of which will have a significant impact on their ability to develop emotionally and psychologically.

Social workers who remove children from their birth family should add the first record explaining the reasons why the decision was made and an account of what happened at the move, how the child was, how they settled, how they were received into the new home. It is important that workers record exactly what was said to the child, so this explanation can be built on by subsequent workers.

Remember everything that is written on a child's file is a record of memories so think about language used and impact on a child as well as recording in a balanced way. If you are removing a baby from hospital, supervising family time out in the community, driving past significant buildings, take a photo. If you are supervising family time record memories, anecdotes, take lots of photos.

Include pictures, paintings, handprints in memory boxes; looking at tiny hands is very powerful. Include cards received by children and school reports. When undertaking assessments (social workers and family support workers) ask parents questions which later in our involvement may be difficult to capture e.g.

Tell me why you chose the name – does it have special significance? Who do you think they look like in the family?

- What can you remember about his/her first steps, first words?
- Who do they take after (for older children)?

Genograms have valuable information about wider family and relationships.

When you are transferring a case to another team write a 'later life letter' about your involvement, decision making, observations, memories of that child and their brothers and sisters.

