



SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WELFARE

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Amy Tsark
Child Welfare Services Branch
Department of Human Services
State of Hawaii
810 Richards St., Suite 400
Honolulu, HI 96813

Dear Ms. Tsark:

A friend recently e-mailed to me a copy of your agency's provocative power point presentation entitled, "A review of federal and state statutes and policies, contributing factors and research findings supporting public kinship care." Since my research on kinship care was used to justify Hawaii's new approach to kin, I feel compelled to suggest that your agency consider modifying the new policy.

I am, and have always been, a strong advocate of kinship care. As you know, kinship care can provide children with a sense of family stability, cultural continuity, and connections to language and religious legacies. In many circumstances, kinship care can benefit children as it may be less traumatic at the time of placement (if the child knows the kinship member), and if it can promote continued contact with birth and extended family members. As you indicate in your power point, a good deal of research supports kinship placement.

But kinship care is not without its hazards and it should not be viewed as beneficial in *all* circumstances. To clarify some of the points made in the presentation: While most data has shown kinship care to be more stable than non-kinship care, more recent work by Mark Testa shows that instability can be pronounced when children are adolescents and that differences in stability may not be as great as was once thought.¹ Further, although the study by Zuravin, Benedict and Sommerfield examined maltreatment reports comparing kin and non-kin foster caregivers, there are several considerations relating to these data that certainly suggest a more equivocal understanding of the phenomenon.²

Similarly, although we presume that placement in kinship care is less traumatic than placement in non-kin care, there is no data to support this conclusion. The articles you

¹ Testa, M. (2001). Kinship care and permanency. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 28(1), 25 – 43.

² See a description of the issues on page 66, Shlonsky, A., & Berrick, J.D. (2001). Assessing and promoting quality in kin and non-kin foster care. *Social Service Review*, 75(1), 60-83.

reference all indicate the presumption of less trauma, but there are no empirical studies to document this point. Instead, as above, it is likely that placement is less traumatic when children know their kin caregiver, but there is no reason to assume that placement is any less traumatic when children are placed with kin strangers compared to non-kin strangers. Further, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that placement can be upsetting to children if they have a secure attachment to their caregiver; moving children out of homes where they feel safe and where they have attached to their caregiver could indeed be quite traumatic for children.

With regard to visitation, as stated above, the research indeed clearly indicates that children visit with their birth parents, siblings, and other extended family members more frequently when they are placed with kin. I underscore again – this is very positive for children. However, the research also indicates that *some* relatives may have difficulties placing appropriate boundaries on visitation and may not always feel confident securing children's safety in these visits.³ This finding does not indict kinship care, but it suggests caution in its utilization rather than blind enthusiasm.

There is limited research showing that children in kinship care may have somewhat fewer mental health and behavioral problems. However, these findings do *not* implicate children's caregivers as the *cause* of their reduced symptomatology. Indeed, it may be that kin are less willing or able to take children with more serious mental health and/or behavioral challenges, or that child welfare workers are less likely to make these placements. There is much we do not yet understand about this important finding.

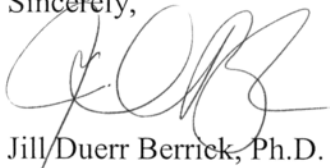
Because there is much to recommend kinship care from the research literature, because kinship care corresponds to the child welfare value of strengthening families, and because federal law suggests a preference for kin, I applaud states for making diligent efforts at the time of child removal to locate and assess appropriate kin for foster care placements. But enthusiasm for the value of *family* should not override our knowledge of the fundamental building blocks children need for their healthy growth and development. Certainly we now have decades of research suggesting that children's attachments to primary caregivers are central to development, and that stable, healthy relationships help to foster these attachments. The literature you cite in your power point refers to children's abilities to form multiple attachments with other caregivers *assuming that they continue to have a secure base*. There is a developing literature that suggests that children *may* be able to develop new attachments with alternative caregivers when they are deprived of their primary caregiver, but our knowledge in this area is only in its infancy. Our knowledge about which conditions help to foster these new attachments is still evolving. Government policy and practice should *never* intentionally separate children from their primary caregivers with whom they have attached and with whom they are likely to live long-term, without compelling evidence of the child's risk to safety. For foster children, these separations only further their already vulnerable developmental risk.

³ See Rodning, Beckwith, and Howard (1991) as discussed in: Shlonsky, A., & Berrick, J.D. (2001). Assessing and promoting quality in kin and non-kin foster care. *Social Service Review*, (75)1, 60 – 83.

Substantial evidence now exists to show convincingly that each additional move in foster care increases children's behavioral problems.⁴ Stability of care is critical for all children; for foster children it is essential.

I do hope your efforts to locate appropriate kin during the early hours and days after removal from the birth home are successful. I also urge you to reconsider policies that move children from safe, stable non-kin settings simply to promote kinship care. Many other alternatives exist (including more "open" foster placements so that children's connections to the birth family can be maximized). These alternatives should be pursued in order to secure children's well-being.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Duerr Berrick', written over the printed name.

Jill Duerr Berrick, Ph.D.
Professor and Associate Dean
Co-Director, Center for Child and Youth Policy

cc: Lillian B. Koller
Director, Department of Human Services

⁴ Newton, R.R., Litrownik, A.J., & Landsverk, J.A. (2000). Children and youth in foster care: Disentangling the relationship between problem behaviors and number of placements. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 24(10), 1363 – 1374.