

# what we know

## FINDING, KEEPING, AND HONOURING CONNECTIONS FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OF GUELPH WELLINGTON

### Introduction and Research Goals

F&CS was concerned that (a) families, children, and youth did not have an adequate support network, and (b) that youth aging out of the system would not have supportive individuals in their lives. To address these concerns, we wanted to ensure that the child welfare system was helping families, children, and youth foster important connections. Furthermore, F&CS wanted to educate the community about children's needs:

Children need more than just a permanent place to live; children also need caring adults to support and understand them. We also wanted to make sure that the people we work with felt that we honoured their experience.

So, we asked the following research question:

How could we change our service model to assist people in finding, keeping, and honouring their connections?

### Background

We wanted to determine if structural agency changes and philosophical shifts would result in better outcomes for the children, youth, and families we worked with. We wanted to hear from children, youth, and families about their experiences. And, we wanted to have support networks in place for those we work with because such connections have the ability to sustain safety, permanency, and wellness outcomes for children, youth, and their families.

### Methods

F&CS developed a definition of permanency that included all the aspects that we wanted to have people focus on when working together and translated this definition into a graphic (4 Markers of Permanency). We developed the definition after doing a qualitative review of permanency definitions internationally.

We reviewed all of the programs that are currently successful in building and sustaining connections for people. We identified most with a model called "Family Finding" by Kevin Campbell. All staff and some community partners were trained in this model.

We created agency positions in 2012 called Family Finding (FF) and Permanency Support (PS) and hired two workers. These workers began to find and reconnect people to their past to create a new future, to create support networks for both families, children, and youth, to listen to the stories of the people they were working with and use their feedback to improve services, and to honour the experience of families and children.

We spoke directly to families, children, and youth that had worked with the Family Finding and Permanency Support workers to determine their experience.

### Limitations

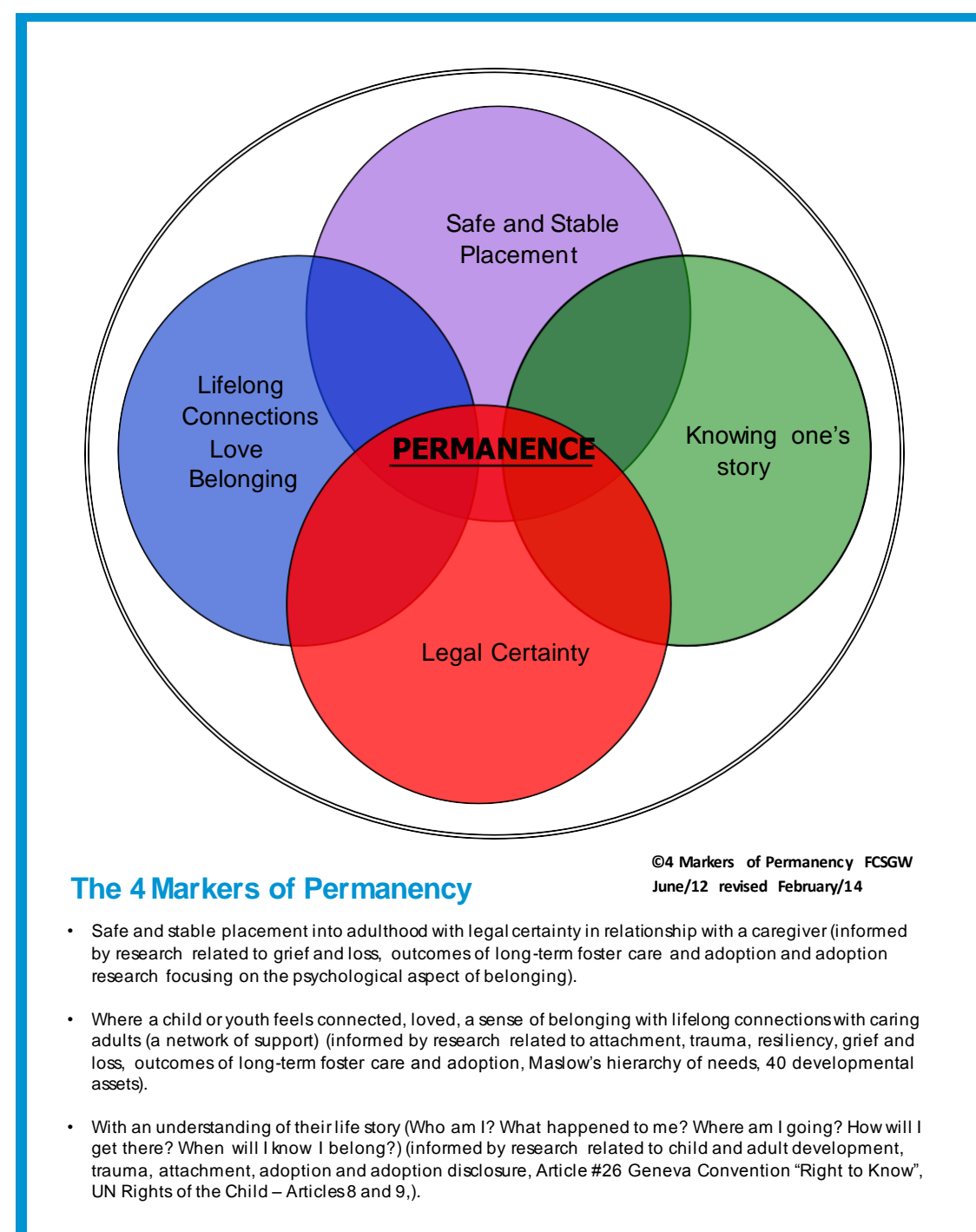
Finding, Keeping, and honouring connections is work that takes place throughout our agency and is not only the specific work of the FF/PSs. The FF/PSs, however, have kept statistics about the work that they do. Therefore, their work is able to be related to the outcomes for children, youth, and their families and networks. Thus, there is more work that has not been captured in our outcomes to date.

Family and Children's Services of Guelph Wellington (F&CS; also known as the Children's Aid Society) acts on behalf of the Ontario government to keep children safe in their families and communities. The Child and Family Services Act of Ontario gives us the authority to work with families when there are worries about child safety, well-being, and permanency for children and youth. We are the local child protection organization in Guelph and Wellington County.

### Research Findings

Key results after making changes at the agency:

- 215 children have had involvement with the Family Finding and Permanency Support Workers (FF/PS). Of these 215 children, over 50% were able to remain with their families or were placed in another permanent living arrangement while the FF/PSs worked with them. Over 70% had a network of support, and over 90% increased their connections (relationships being developed).
- Of all the children in foster care in 2015 – 2016, the children and youth that were working with the FF/PSs reached their permanency outcomes, specific to placement, more quickly than children who were not involved with the FF/PSs.
- A review of 20 cases of children living in foster care (10 of them being involved with a FF/PS and 10 not being involved with a FF/PS) found that cases with FF/PSs had:
  - More meetings with families and their network of support
  - More internal planning meetings to move the permanency work forward at a quicker pace
  - More family and network members involved in planning.
  - 40% of the cases with a FF/PS achieved permanency with specific reference to placement vs. only ten percent of the non-FF/PS cases.
- Children and youth that reconnected with or met family members reported feeling heard, loved, and as if a "hole had been filled".
- The new definition of permanency - 4 Markers of Permanency - has been embedded and socialized into the agency's culture.
- Parents said that reconnecting with their past was painful but helpful in their healing process; they now had "somebody" to call when they needed support.
- People (children, youth, family members) reported finally being "helped", "heard", and "honoured".



### Conclusions

Structural agency changes and philosophical shifts have resulted in the desired changes being translated in the work that F&CS does with children, youth, and families. These results were reported directly from the people (children, youth, and families) we work with. Children, youth, and families also told us that having networks of support in place made them feel less lonely and like others cared about them.

Our agency continues to believe that networks of support have the ability to sustain safety, permanency, and wellness outcomes for children and their families. F&CS will continue to look for new ways to ensure that our approach is helpful for the people we work with.

### Researcher

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