

The Sounding Board: News and Reviews in Child Welfare

"Promoting resilience and permanence in child welfare," by Robbie Gilligan, Chapter 2 in Promoting resilience in child welfare, edited by Robert Flynn, Peter Dudding and James Barber, University of Ottawa Press, 2006.

Robbie Gilligan is an Irish scholar at the Department of Social Studies and Children's Research Center, Trinity College Dublin in Dublin, Ireland. Gilligan's chapter in this outstanding collection of articles by (mostly) English, Canadian and Australian scholars is one of the most eloquent pieces ever written about foster children's risk of losing social connections and of leaving foster care "from an endless tundra of aloneness and loneliness." Gilligan tells the story of attending a graduation party for a young woman in care who commented that "All my friends are adults," mostly persons who worked in the service systems which had helped her along the way. "She meant the comment appreciatively and affectionately, but there was certainly another very telling way to read it," Gilligan states. "Her story illustrates the risk of restricted social networks, excessive reliance on formal services and the master identity of being in care." Gilligan's concern is that "Immersion in professional service systems may risk cutting young people off from peers and natural networks," without developing much of an alternative family structure. Gilligan is concerned that these youth may develop "a master identity" of 'child in care' and be cut off from family, friends and other social contacts outside foster care or residential care settings, a developmental trajectory "that may lead on to social exclusion on many fronts."

Gilligan's view is that developing a sense of belonging should be central in thinking about the needs of youth in foster care; probably few American child welfare practitioners would disagree with this idea. Child welfare law and practice have been developed to achieve permanent family arrangements for children in out of home care. However, Gilligan insists on thinking about permanence from the child's perspective "rather than merely from that of the placing agency." Gilligan writes that "Rather than thinking of permanence as a merely legal or administrative concept or threshold, we should also think of it as a psychological state – and a state that must, crucially, be assessed by its incumbent." How the child thinks about her permanent placement is critical as (Gilligan asserts) is "the question of how isolated the child would be if the placement proves not to endure."

Gilligan advocates considering permanence "in terms of two different axes – stability (staying put) and continuity (staying connected). Gilligan is clearly concerned about school age children and youth entering out of home care and to what extent permanency options other than reunification for these children are "accessible" and "sustainable". He is also concerned about the question "What proportion (of these older children and youth) enjoy strong ties to their new family well into adulthood?"

Gilligan asks child welfare practitioners and decision makers to think carefully "about the significance of continuity of key connections in the child's life." He advocates considering three dimensions to "connectedness": (1) the child's subjective sense of belonging (2) the cultural connectedness between the child's background and the permanent placement and (3) the social connectedness between the child's original social network and the legally permanent home. Gilligan uses a horticultural metaphor to illustrate his perspective. "No attempt to transplant a tree or shrub is easy and ... can only be contemplated if a lot of original soil surrounding the roots goes to the new site of planting. Similarly, I propose that the child needs to bring a sufficient amount of emotional soil from the old site to the new, if the new placement is to have a chance of taking hold."

Gilligan also argues for the importance of "second tier supports, people who can step into the breach if the placement breaks down." Gilligan would like to see a "network for life" for each child in long term care, "not just a family for life for some fortunate children." Persons in the child's network would not necessarily be able to raise the child but would act as "guarantors" for the child's well being. In assessing the reality of permanence for older children and youth in care, Gilligan then asks some probing questions: "Whether the child has sustained access to people who will feel a sense of obligation to the child? And whether there are people who can work alongside the primary caregivers without undermining their position ... And whether there are already people who provide a brief haven from storms that may blow up in the relationship between the young person and the carers?"

Gilligan believes that good permanent planning is not just about legally securing a placement with a family but also “about cultivating ties to a set of network members.” It is about identifying possible “guarantors – people who may display and honor a commitment to the young person in adolescence – or later life – as required.” There must, Gilligan states, be enough of a connection between these ‘guarantors’ and the child that offers of or requests for help can be natural and unobtrusive. The ‘guarantors’ protect the child or youth from potential isolation and loneliness; they provide help and support to parents and youth as needed and they can help the youth connect to other parts of the network. Gilligan reminds professionals that research on social support has underlined the lesson that emotional security depends on a person’s confidence that help will be available from a support system when needed. If youth in long term foster care, guardianships or adoptive homes doubt that family members will stick by them during conflicts or crises and do not believe that there are other people in their life who would willingly help them in extreme circumstances, then legal permanency has not achieved its goal of assuring children and youth a sense of psychological belonging and emotional security.

Gilligan cautions child welfare practitioners against casually or thoughtlessly severing a youth’s “positive threads from a child’s past networks.” “I say to my students that they should imagine meeting the child with whom they are dealing, grown to adulthood and imagine themselves justifying the choices they made or recommended for that child, choices that might have meant or led to cutting ties with siblings, relatives, schools or other key anchor points in a child’s life. I think that stance may humble us somewhat and temper any idea that we have – or know the right answer at all times,” Gilligan asserts.

Gilligan advocates that practitioners have tolerance for children’s ambivalence about their relationships to their birth family and the family with which they are placed in out of home care. He believes emotional ambivalence is the natural state of foster children who run the risk of a “double exile” from either world. “We should avoid working with children in such a way that we force them to make a choice, or force a choice on them between these two worlds,” he states. Gilligan reminds us that children will have to come to grips with their past in order to prepare for the future. He adds that “Care is about much more than what is going on in the here and now, important, of course though that is. Carers have to be custodians of the long – term interests and of the long – term connections of the children they serve.”

Gilligan urges practitioners and decision makers to think of “the legacy that we leave the young person to bring into and through adulthood.” He believes that most young people “would hope that that legacy includes a pathway into a stable relationship, a stable job and a stable social network ...” “And crucially they would hope for guarantees of connections to people with a partisan commitment to the young person, whether born of kinship ties or otherwise.”

In addition to a long term and reliable social network, Gilligan believes that youth resiliency is likely to be enhanced by positive school experiences (academic and non – academic), “childhood industry and a general sense of competence” and by a constructive appraisal of self and circumstances, that is, by a strong work ethic and capacity for initiative and by self confidence and self esteem. Gilligan advises caregivers and caseworkers “to build on even one positive factor in a child’s circumstances whether that is an interest, hobby or unusual talent. “One thing going well may challenge a child’s perception of himself or herself, and what is possible,” Gilligan writes.

Gilligan comments that “There are many launching pads for trajectories of positive development.” He believes that “We also need to be cautious about over – reliance on a single route to permanence (e.g., adoption from public care); or about too narrow an interpretation of what we mean by permanence (e.g., engineering primary attachments to new caregivers); or too dogmatic a view about what leads to permanence (e.g., strict compliance with a singular policy).” Furthermore, Gilligan reminds us that children and youth have the capacity to develop thoughtful, resourceful and intelligent responses to their predicaments.

Gilligan’s article is a reminder that when children are removed from their parents’ care due either to abuse or neglect, or to their behavioral problems or disabilities, they have left one risky situation and entered another type of hazardous environment, i.e., one in which their key relationships and social connections are put at risk. Either suddenly or gradually, children may lose connections not only to parents but also to siblings placed in other homes, relatives, friends, schools and neighborhoods. Gilligan’s concept of permanency includes these elements, not just an exclusive focus on a parental home; and it is these connections, Gilligan believes, which decision makers must strive to preserve or replace, not an easy task in child welfare planning structures narrowly focused on creating a legally secure relationship between one or two caregivers and a child.