

Focus on Foster Care Services: Evaluation of Cecil County's Team Approach

by David Ayer

About the Author

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Issue

Over half a million children annually are placed in foster care across the nation. In Maryland there are over 10,000 children in foster care on any given day (Maryland Governor's Office for Children, Youth and Families, 2004). A major problem facing children placed in foster care is whether they will be reunited with their parents, or whether foster care services will need to find them another home. In the early 1990s, several barriers delayed the placement of foster care children into permanent homes (e.g., the failure to find relatives or fathers of children placed, the failure to keep track of parents' whereabouts, an inadequate service agreement and an insufficient execution of the service agreement), perhaps best characterized as a "tolerance of delay" in achieving permanence (Milleman, 1995). The lack of, or delays in, attaining a permanent home is no small matter. Children without opportunities to form attachments often have poor impulse control, low self-esteem, poor peer relationships, learning difficulties and as adults, difficulties providing nurturance and bonding with their own children (Fahlberg, 1991).

A promising solution to accelerating the placement of foster care children into permanent homes lies in the Team Approach to foster care services developed and implemented by Cecil County, Maryland, during the early 1990s (Child Welfare League of America, 1997). In the Traditional Approach to foster care, one caseworker works with the child, the foster parents and the child's parents. The Team Approach seeks to provide family-centered services that minimize the time that children spend in foster care placement and features paired foster care workers assigned to foster care cases: one worker focuses on the child in foster care placement and the other worker focuses on the parents. The Team Approach bolsters agency attention to the parent on whom the decision to reunify or seek an alternative permanent home (such as adoption) hinges.

The Team Approach was meant to overcome key barriers to permanence through simultaneous, rather than linear planning of permanency options (reunification, legal guardianship, adoption); improve staff morale; and reduce worker turnover in the foster care unit (Milleman, 1995). This approach has also influenced elements of several innovations undertaken years later in Maryland: concurrency planning, as multiple permanency goals are considered simultaneously, with the goal of adoption facilitated by the dual licensing strategy; and FAMILY TO FAMILY (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1992), as the foster care provider is seen as an integral part of the Team Approach.

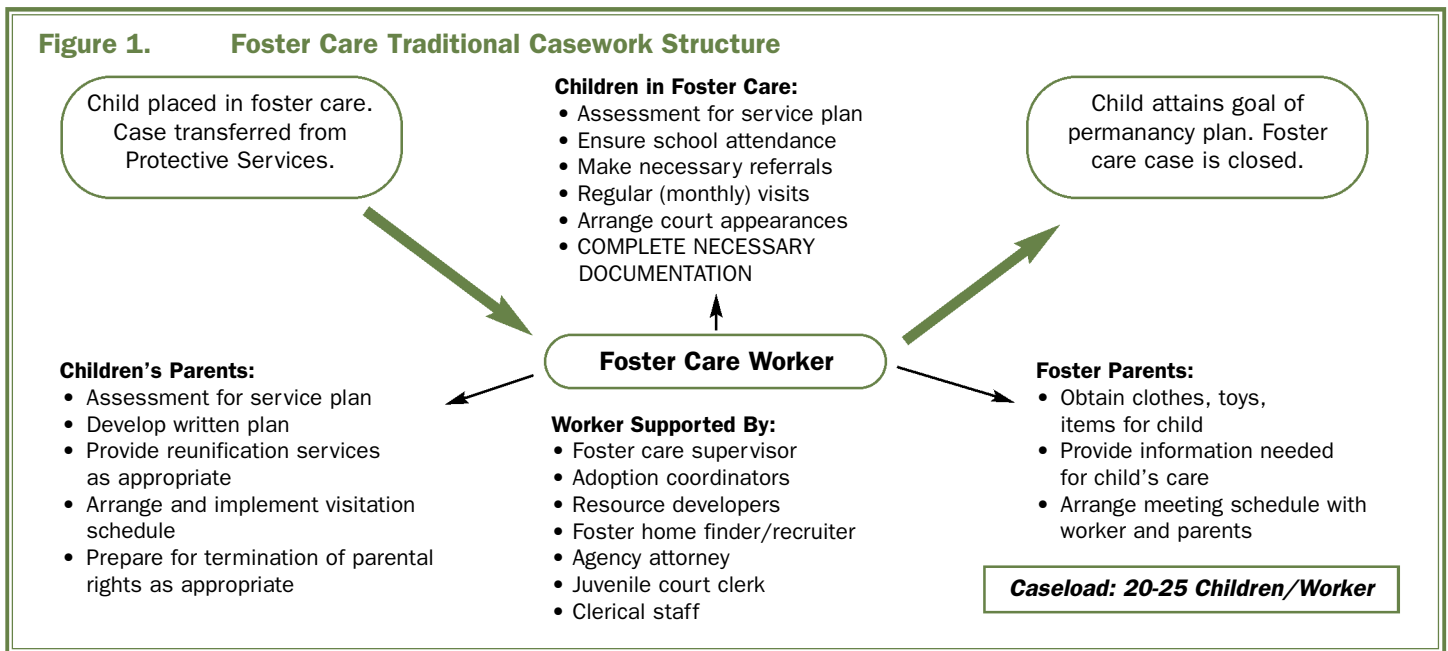
From both a policy and a research perspective, it is important to understand the extent to which the Team Approach results in better outcomes for foster care children and parents than the Traditional Approach. Based on an analysis of over 2,700 case records for foster care children, including an innovative event history analysis (Lewandowski, 2004), this study found that the Team Approach encourages and achieves speedier reunification between foster children and their parents.

Background

Foster care services usually begin when child protective services (CPS) investigates reports of child abuse and neglect. CPS assesses child safety, makes a determination about the future risk of harm to the child and, if necessary, removes the child from his/her parents. The child is placed in foster care.

Once in foster care the local department of social services is responsible for maintaining the child's placement at a foster home and developing a permanency plan for the child. The foster care worker works with the child, the foster parents and the child's parents to make a permanency plan and execute the plan. While reunification is the desired outcome wherever the child's safety can be ensured, the agency is responsible for considering alternatives such as adoption or legal guardianship. The best interests of the child dictate that permanency be achieved as soon as possible.

Figure 1. Foster Care Traditional Casework Structure



The foster care worker works with three basic groups: the foster children, the foster parents and the children's parents (Figure 1). The worker is responsible for facilitating the children's and foster parents' adjustment process, coordinating parent/child visitation, and forming a working relationship with the children's parents and/or relatives to establish a reunification plan and/or consider the adoption alternative. Throughout this time the worker assesses progress toward reunification and, failing reunification, takes steps necessary to find a suitable alternative permanency goal.

With the intensive mental and emotional challenges of each case and the typical size of the caseload, foster care workers frequently become overwhelmed—it is not a job for the faint of heart or spirit. Given caseload size, the array of responsibilities and the contractual hiring practices at the time, by the late 1980s departments of social services were having considerable trouble retaining staff.

The Team Approach to foster care services is based on a family-centered philosophy. The task of providing foster care services is divided into a few parts that are the responsibility of different foster care staff members. The Child Worker (CW) focuses on the child and foster parents and shares a foster care caseload paired with the Natural Parent Worker (NPW) focusing on the child's parents. Another foster care worker focuses on documentation requirements for all foster care cases.

Figure 2 illustrates the division of labor articulated by Cecil County's Team Approach. Instead of one worker responsible for all aspects of the case, the newly configured foster care team consists of several interrelated roles (Cecil County Department of Social Services, 1992).

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of the Team Approach explored in this study was the increased attention on the child's parents. The parents of a child removed from home have many needs that may not be fully addressed during the course of traditional foster care services. In the Traditional Approach, the case worker's priorities are on the child's needs as well as on critical documentation mandates (Foster Care Review Board, 1988). Cecil County felt that the parents were getting the least attention and had fewer positive experiences with social services that could lead to a real possibility of reunification (Rando, 1995). The Team Approach meets both the child's needs and the parent's needs, which include:

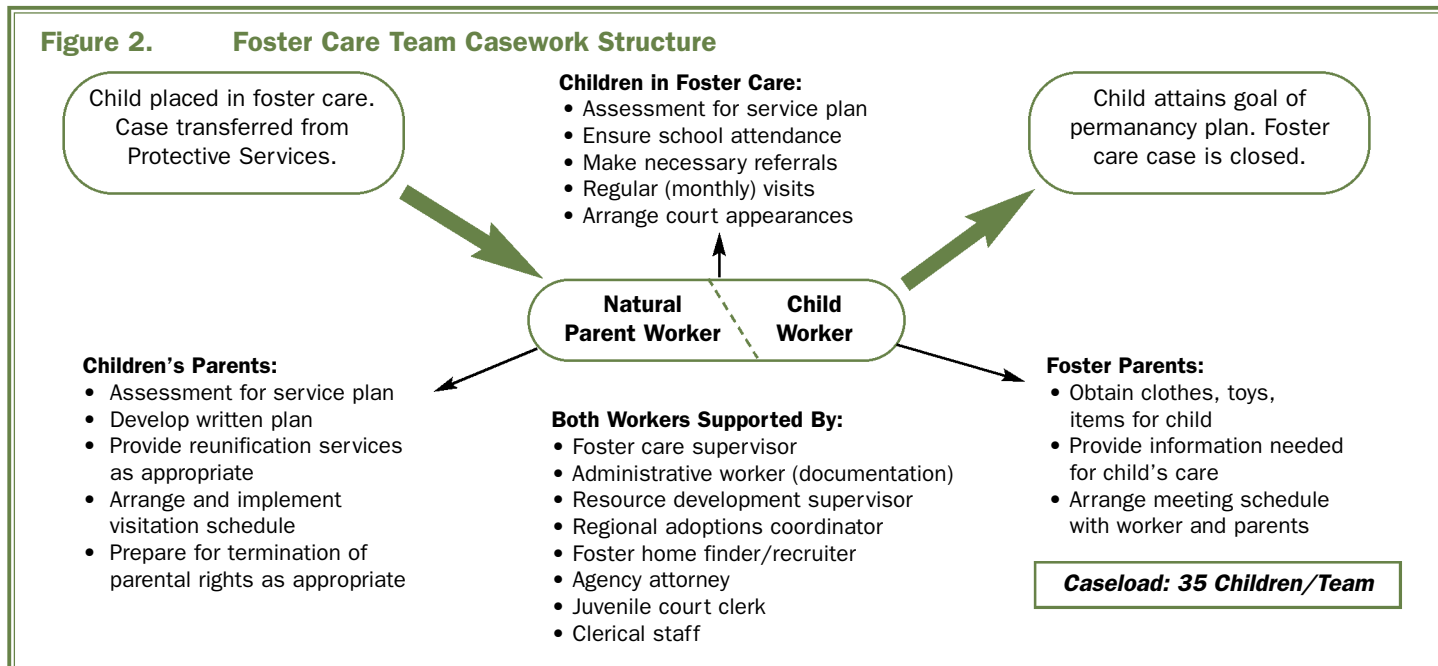
- Working on the permanency plan,
- Receiving reunification services,
- Gauging change—evaluating progress, and getting guidance/support to make changes, and
- Being held accountable for demonstrating change.

The Study

Based on a process study and an outcomes analysis, Cecil County's Team Approach was compared with similar counties providing the traditional, single worker approach to foster care services. In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the Team Approach to foster care services, interviews were conducted with the foster care staff at the study and comparison counties, including foster care workers, foster care supervisors and two key staff members at the study county who were architects of the Team Approach. Staff members answered a series of questions at both the study and comparison counties, and the study county staff members answered additional questions specifically about the operation and their perspectives of the Team

(continued on reverse)

Figure 2. Foster Care Team Casework Structure



Approach. The responses from all the interviewees were compiled and the basic points were synthesized for each respondent group: foster care workers and supervisors/program directors.

Key Findings from the Process Study

Based on the synthesis of the interview responses, a central finding emerged: the Team Approach is structured to maximize the provision of reunification services in the foster care case. The structure of the Traditional Approach to foster care services, wherein a single foster care worker manages all aspects of the foster care case, leads to a concentration of casework attention on the foster children. Overall, a larger proportion of casework time is spent on the children in foster placement and on the stability of the children in placement. Family reunification occurs under the Traditional Approach, but it appears that the traditional model may actually discourage family reunification because it requires a great deal of effort to attend to the needs of both the foster children and the parents engaged in the reunification process.

Perhaps the most illuminating segment of the process interviews concerned the capacity to address the responsibilities to the child and the parents. The Traditional Approach foster care workers made several statements about the struggle to meet (or juggle) the needs of the child in care, the foster parents and the parents:

“Starting out cases is hardest because there is lots of parent involvement. Often it is dealing with the first part of the foster care case where worker burnout happens.”

“The work is difficult, very hard, overwhelming sometimes, and includes long hours.”

“If reunification gets underway, this was hardest, felt like needing to be in two places at once, get spread thin.”

Indeed, “reunification cases” was cited as one of the negative influences on the capacity to manage foster care responsibilities to the children in care and their parents. Foster care supervisors felt that workers were overloaded and that the cases were hard to manage. Workers felt it was impossible to do everything.

The structure of the Team Approach, therefore, affords substantial time to both the foster children and the parents by providing a foster care worker for each key participant in the case. By design, the Team Approach was geared to alleviate the extra burden that comes with the work to reunify the family. When asked about the capacity of the team to address the needs of the child and the parents, the basic response was that the CW could focus on the foster child’s needs while the NPW could focus on the needs of the child’s parents. The Team Approach appears to have the optimal structure for ascertaining quickly whether family reunification is viable, or to move decisively to the next best permanency plan if reunification is not possible.

Clearly, foster care workers using the Traditional Approach can and do bring about reunification. Because the bulk of their attention is on the foster child, the parents may not get sufficient time to develop and execute a family service plan to address the issues that led to foster care placement. Consequently, the Traditional Approach appears best suited for cases in which reunification is clearly not an option (e.g., parents are absent, or the child is a teenager heading toward emancipation) and only the foster child and his/her needs must be addressed.

A critical success factor for the Team Approach hinges on the quality of team member communication. Without a good working relationship between team members who can effectively communicate, the team strategy was considered detrimental to the mission of foster care services. Disagreements sometimes happened—the strength of the team was its ability to sort out differences and reach agreement.

Overall, those interviewed in the study county were enthusiastic about the benefits of the Team Approach. “If you have a well-functioning team, then it’s a great service to the child and the parent,” according to another foster care staff person in the study county. Given that counties will always have both kinds of foster care cases, it appears that a foster care unit could match its foster care children to the most appropriate foster care approach (Team or Traditional), taking into account the preferences and strengths of its foster care staff.

Key Findings from the Outcomes Analysis

The outcomes analysis for this study was based on the analysis of 2,713 case records for first time foster care children in the study and comparison counties from Fiscal Year 1987 through 1997. The data set came from the Maryland Citizen’s Review Board for Children (formerly Foster Care Review Board). Since the mid-1980s, the Review Board has maintained a foster care and adoptions subset of data provided by the child welfare administrative database at the Maryland Department of Human Resources. Each case record contained information about whether the foster child was served by the Team or Traditional Approach, date of entry into and closing from foster care, date of birth, gender, race, primary reason for entering foster care (type of maltreatment, such as physical abuse and neglect), and closing reason (disposition at closing, such as reunification, adoption, or relative placement). The study used records for children entering foster care for the first time, as their situation was unclouded by prior experience with the child welfare system, thereby simplifying the analysis.

Three hypotheses drove the outcomes analysis. Hypothesis #1 anticipated that, with the Team Approach, more families would be reunified and fewer foster children adopted in the study county than the comparison counties. Hypothesis #2 posited that the Team Approach would reduce the time needed to achieve a “good” outcome including reunification, adoption, relative placement or guardianship, compared with the Traditional Approach. Hypothesis #3 anticipated that the subset of children who are reunified with their families would experience fewer reentries into foster care than children reunified under the Traditional Approach.

Derived from the results of the probit models, the analysis for Hypothesis #1 revealed that, as a result of the Team Approach, the proportion of cases reunified shifted upward while the proportion of cases closing to adoption shifted downward. Following the implementation of the Team Approach to foster care services, there was a 13.4 percentage point increase in the probability of

Some Notes on the Analytical Tools Used

The Outcomes Analysis applied a Probit and Event History statistical analysis within a “difference in differences” approach to comparing outcomes, as there were data available before (Pre-Team) and after (Post-Team) the Team Approach got underway in November 1991. The combination of a “difference in differences” approach and strong statistical tools provided a robust framework for evaluating the Team Approach.

The “difference in differences” approach refers to measuring the difference between the study and comparison jurisdictions in relation to each of their differences, over time, on a given variable (e.g., foster care length of stay). In other words, the “difference in differences” method refers to comparing the direction and magnitude that a given variable (e.g., length of stay in foster care) takes from the Pre-Team to the Post-Team time periods for the study jurisdiction (Team Approach) and for comparison jurisdictions (Traditional Approach).

Probit analysis was used for Hypothesis #1 and is used to answer “yes/no” questions (e.g., are Team Approach cases more or less likely than non-Team cases to close to reunification), taking independent variables (e.g., age of child at foster care placement, demographics, and reason for entry) into account.

Event History analysis refers to a class of statistics that both describes (using survival curves and life table analysis) the survival of a population (e.g., children entering foster care) to a concluding event (e.g., foster care close or foster care reentry); and also estimates the instantaneous potential that the concluding event will happen after the treatment is administered (Team Approach), given that the participant has survived up to a given point in time, using the Cox proportional hazards model. Event History analysis was used for the analysis of Hypotheses #2 and #3. This is a powerful analysis that measured the impact of the Team Approach, and is a particularly valuable form of analysis because it uses information about all cases, even those that do not experience the concluding event (known as censored cases).

being reunified, on average, among the foster children. There was a 7.4 percentage point decrease in the probability of being adopted, on average, among the foster children. This makes sense, as the Natural Parent Workers are able to focus a greater proportion of caseworker attention on the parents of the children placed in foster care, compared with the Traditional Approach.

The analysis for Hypothesis #2 revealed that the Team Approach achieves, on the whole, shorter lengths of time than the Traditional Approach to reach a “good” outcome (reunification, adoption, guardianship, or relative placement). The Team Approach accelerates reaching a “good” outcome during the period that starts 11 days after entry and ends 9 months after entry. An even stronger effect was found during this period for the length of time until a case reaches reunification. Indeed, the strongest results for this study come from the Team Approach impact on reunification.

Life table analysis yields compelling information about the Team Approach impact on length of time required for reunification to be achieved. The effect of implementing the Team Approach was an overall reduction in both the first quartile and the median length of time required for reunification to be achieved, in favor of the Team Approach (Table 1).

Table 1

Comparison of Length of Time Required for Cases to Close to Reunification							
Quartile	Comparison Counties			Study County			Overall
	Pre	Post	Change	Pre	Post	Change	
1	2.3	3.8	1.5	10.2	6.9	-3.3	-4.8
2	32.3	41.0	8.6	34.7	21.7	-13.0	-21.6

The first quartile of the length of time required for reunification to be achieved was reduced by nearly 5 months by implementing the Team Approach. The advantage of the Team Approach was even more substantial for the median length of time required for reunification to be achieved. The effect of implementing the Team Approach was to reduce the median length of time required for reunification to be achieved by nearly 22 months. This finding was supported by the Cox proportional hazards model results for reunification: between 11 days and 9 months in foster care, the Team Approach has a statistically significant impact on shortening length of time required for reunification.

Hypothesis #3 anticipated that fewer children would reenter foster care after being reunified. As the Team Approach concentrates efforts on reunification and returning children home sooner than the Traditional Approach, children returning home should experience fewer reentries compared with the Traditional Approach. Survival curve analysis comparing the study and comparison counties before and after the Team Approach was implemented in Cecil County revealed no significant differences prior to implementation of the Team Approach, but found significant differences after implementation favoring the Team Approach. The hazard function results, however, were inconclusive. This can be viewed as a positive outcome in that there is no evidence the Team Approach results in harm to children reunified with their families.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Cecil County’s Team Approach to foster care services shows considerable promise as a complement to the traditional, single worker approach. The central theme emerging from both the process and outcomes analyses is that the Team Approach to foster care services hastens children’s attainment of permanent homes, particularly reunification between foster children and their parents, compared with the Traditional Approach. The Team Approach facilitates reunification by maximizing service delivery to the parents and children.

Even while further research is required to validate these findings, other Maryland counties and Baltimore City, and states across the country, may be interested in learning how the Team Approach works, and how they might incorporate it in their child welfare practices.

Maryland faces considerable budget tensions while its child welfare system is under close scrutiny in light of the state and federal accountability measures set for foster care services. Although achieving the federal standards is challenging in the best of times, Maryland currently falls short of the standards to reunify children within 12 months (Standard: 76.2%; Maryland—Fiscal Year 2004: 55.0%), and place children in adoptive homes within 24 months (Standard: 32.0%; Maryland—Fiscal Year 2004: 20.1%). Nonetheless, by focusing as much attention as possible on the parents, the Team Approach should help Maryland become more accountable and make greater progress toward these goals. The practical effect would be that a greater proportion of children will be reunified rather than adopted, thus giving foster care children the best shot at returning home.

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