

Coram Practice Note 1

Concurrent Planning – Early Permanence for Babies in Care Proceedings



What is concurrent planning?

Concurrent planning (CP) supports early permanence planning in fostering and adoption. It was developed in the US in the 1980s and brought to the UK in 1998, when the first CP scheme, the Goodman Project, was launched by the Manchester Adoption Agency. Coram set up its concurrent planning project in 1999, and is now the only dedicated team nationally.

The Coram concurrent planning project offers:

- a stable placement with foster carers who are also approved as adopters
- expert supervised contact in a dedicated contact room
- assessment of relatives who are possible carers for the child if commissioned
- support for parents to make the required changes in their lives
- support for parents if the child is returned to their care
- a parenting assessment for the Court if commissioned
- continued work with parents if adoption is the outcome
- facilitation and support of post-adoption contact (direct and indirect)
- post-adoption support for children and adoptive parents.

How does it work?

Concurrent planning is decided by the local authority as the care plan for the child where there is an application for a Care Order.

The aim of concurrent planning is to support either the child's return to their birth family or their permanent placement with an adoptive family. These aims are worked on concurrently, instead of sequentially (as is more usual), as the name implies.

It is designed for very vulnerable children aged 0–24 months where there is a high level of probability (greater than 80%) that return to their birth family or extended family will not be possible, but a further period of assessment is thought necessary before the courts can come to a final decision. The parents may have already had a child taken into care, or may have severe mental health problems or substance misuse problems, or the mother may have a partner who has a history of offences against children.

Concurrent planning works actively to enable the birth family to take up this last chance of demonstrating that they can care for their baby safely. Its aim is to achieve the return of the child, and to avoid the considerable delays and frequent change of foster placements commonly experienced by these vulnerable, very young children before permanent placement can be made, whether this is the child's return to the birth family or adoption. Research shows that the longer the delay and the greater the number of foster placements, the greater the potential for damage to a child's mental health and development, and the

less likely it is that they can be placed permanently and successfully with an adoptive family. Concurrent planning lays the foundations for greatly improved health and emotional wellbeing throughout the child's life by giving more stability during the vital early years of development.

The Coram concurrent planning project recruits foster carers who are also approved as adopters. They must be willing to foster a baby in the first instance, and to support the child's return to the birth parent, with the possibility that the fostering arrangement will lead to adoption. These CP carers are carefully selected and trained and receive intensive support during and after the fostering period, regardless of outcome. A primary aim is, wherever possible, to place the child with foster carers who share his or her cultural background and ethnicity.

The foster carers are asked to:

- ensure at least one carer is at home full-time with the child during the placement
- provide dedicated foster care to one child only (or occasionally two siblings) during the placement
- escort the child themselves to and from contact with the birth parent
- spend time with the birth parent both at the beginning and end of contact sessions, to facilitate smooth transition
- be willing to build a positive and respectful relationship with the baby's parents
- be prepared to actively support the transfer of the child's care back to his/her parent(s) or relatives should the court decide it is safe to do so.

Coram facilitates supervised contact between the baby and birth parent(s) as required by the court, until the assessment process is complete and the decision is made about the baby's future. It submits a report to the court on contact and on the birth parents' ability to make use of the support offered.

If return to the birth parent(s) is not considered possible by the court, the local authority plan will be adoption by the concurrent planning carers.

In the small number of cases where the child returns to its birth parent(s) or extended family, the concurrent planning carers will work closely with the parent or relative to achieve as smooth a transition as possible.

What are the benefits?

For the child:

- Consistency and continuity of dedicated foster care from a carer able to form an emotional attachment with the child, focused on the child's individual needs
- Reduced delay in arranging permanent placement if the decision is made not to return the child to its birth family
- Consistency of contact arrangements aimed at minimising disruption to the child's routines
- Expert supervision during contact with the birth parent(s)
- Expert support for the foster carers in meeting the baby's particular needs during placement and up to and following adoption.

For the birth parent(s):

- Expert support and parenting coaching during supervised contact
- Social work support to help them to make the changes necessary for the return of their child
- Independent, objective, expert assessment of their parenting skills and their ability to change if this is commissioned
- Pre-adoption counselling where adoption is the plan
- Post-adoption support where adoption is the outcome.

Concerns

Concerns have been expressed that the concurrent planning process is weighted against the child's return to the birth parents and towards adoption.

Concurrent planning is explicitly designed to facilitate the child's return to the birth parents where possible through the intensive parenting support programme it offers and the consistency of foster care and contact arrangements, which reduce distress and maximise the benefits of contact for the baby and birth parent.

It is used only with very young children where the probability of the child's return home is already weighted against the birth family, based on what is known about their history and current circumstances. However it gives the birth family the best possible chance to demonstrate that they can make the necessary changes required for the return of the child.

Good practice in concurrent planning

- Proactive recruitment of prospective concurrent carers from diverse black and minority ethnic communities
- Adequate financial support during fostering phase to enable lone parents and those on low incomes to undertake this role – Coram has agreed this with local authorities
- Settling in time – the baby or toddler needs to be allowed time to settle into the placement before contact begins
- Short travel time – the distance between foster placement and contact venue to be no greater than 20 miles
- Regularity of contact – ideally no more than three times a week, to lessen disruption to the baby's routine
- Active supervisor role – the contact supervisor to coach and model good parenting for the birth parent during contact.

Contact: Jeanne Kaniuk, Head of Adoption and Concurrent Planning, Coram, Jeanne@coram.org.uk 020 7520 0350. Or alternatively Sophie Laws, Head of Policy and Research, Sophie@coram.org.uk 020 7520 0325.

Please see also Coram Practice Note 2: 'Infancy Contact Research: Intensive contact with birth parents: implications for the emotional development of infants and young children placed in foster care'

Note: All images are posed by models.