

The Quality of Home Studies and Children's Placement Stability

by Thomas M. Crea, PhD, LCSW

In foster care and adoption practice, each prospective family must undergo a home study assessment prior to receiving a child into their home. Home studies serve to prepare families for placement, to gather information for compatibility purposes, and to evaluate the fitness of the family. In finding the best placement for a child, children's workers look to home studies to determine (among other factors) whether a realistic match can be made between the child's needs and the capacities of the family and whether serious "red flag" issues have been identified that might preclude a family's ability to provide a safe and stable home.

Yet, the quality and thoroughness of home studies vary greatly across jurisdictions. In a research study currently underway through Boston College and the University of Maryland, child specific recruiters indicated that assessments can range from 3-6 pages in

Structured Analysis Family Evaluation (SAFE)

SAFE is a method of conducting interviews with families as well as a structured evaluation of information gathered during interviews (Crea, Barth, Chintapalli, & Buchanan, 2009). SAFE draws upon information collected in structured questionnaires designed to improve the information gathering process. These tools include: (a) applicant-completed questionnaires that cover applicants' upbringing, family relationships, life experiences, habits and patterns of behavior; (b) reference letter templates; (c) a psychosocial inventory; and (4) a Desk Guide that provides anchored scales to assist the social worker in interpreting the psychosocial inventory (for more information, see www.safehomestudy.org). The questionnaires help workers identify topics that require clarification and development

workers with experience conducting SAFE assessments as well as conventional home study assessments indicated SAFE was better at identifying issues pertaining to families' health, psychological, or psychiatric issues; illicit activities like substance abuse and inappropriate behaviors towards children; and problematic issues pertaining to relationships and behavior. Similar to the previous study, younger respondents found SAFE more useful than older workers as did those without a formal social work degree. Findings from these studies indicate that SAFE is generally being accepted as a home study practice model and is preferred as a means of identifying serious "red flag" issues within prospective applicants. The extent to which SAFE influences long-term placement stability, above and beyond its acceptance in practice, is a promising area for future research.

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length to over 40 pages. This wide variability suggests that the quality of information gathered during the assessment process, and the depth of understanding of families' strengths and needs, may be severely lacking in some instances. In these cases, children's workers may be forced to reject a family who may otherwise be an excellent match for a child, based on a lack of information about the family's suitability. In terms of placement stability, research suggests the importance of finding the optimal placement early following a child's entry to care and that "a more in-depth assessment and profile of placement setting attributes" should facilitate a strong match between a child's needs and a family's ability to meet those needs effectively (Webster, Barth, & Needell, 2000, p. 629). One strategy to address this issue is to pursue a uniform home study format. The Structured Analysis Family Evaluation (SAFE) is the first such method to be used in multiple jurisdictions in the US. At the time of this writing, SAFE is being used in 14 States and 5 Canadian Provinces.

over the course of the interviews. These questionnaires facilitate and supplement the interview process rather than replace or direct the interview. Caseworkers are free to pursue other topics that are important to understanding applicants' situations. After gathering all relevant information, workers then determine whether past issues of concern have been mitigated by present circumstances.

SAFE Research Findings

To date, research on SAFE has examined workers' perceptions of SAFE compared with conventional methods in general and, in particular, whether SAFE is better at identifying specific issues of concern. In one survey study with 145 participants, workers trained in the SAFE method indicated that they preferred SAFE overall compared with conventional methods (Crea et al., 2009). Respondents rated SAFE significantly higher than conventional methods at facilitating concurrent planning and reducing interjurisdictional barriers to placement. Less experienced workers preferred SAFE more strongly while more experienced workers tended to be less positive. In a second study with 220 participants,

Conclusion

While the above research does not directly address placement stability, workers' preferences for SAFE have implications for making a child's first placement the best placement. First, if SAFE succeeds in screening families more thoroughly regarding issues of concern, this improved screening may lessen the likelihood that a placement will disrupt because of unaddressed family issues. Second, if SAFE studies produce more thorough information about a family, workers will have better information at their disposal to create a successful match between children's needs and families' preferences and capabilities. Third, if SAFE truly improves concurrent planning efforts, children will be more likely to remain in the same placement should efforts at family reunification fail. While more research is needed to explore whether SAFE positively impacts children's placement experiences, many adoption workers generally believe SAFE represents a step forward in home study assessments.

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