



State of Florida  
Department of Children and Families

Charlie Crist  
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Secretary

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**DATE:** October 1, 2010

**TO:** Regional Directors

**THROUGH:** David L. Fairbanks, Assistant Secretary for Programs  
Pete Dube, Assistant Secretary for Operations

**FROM:** Alan Abramowitz, State Director, Office of Family Safety

**SUBJECT:** Guidelines to Consider in Moving Infants and Young Children  
**ACTION REQUIRED:** Disseminate to front line child protective investigators and community-based care case managers and their supervisors  
**DUE DATE:** None

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**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this memorandum is to share information to assist child protection and child welfare staff in making the best decisions regarding placement of young children.

**BACKGROUND:** As emphasized below, this content is not a rule but instead includes factors for consideration. This practice guidance was developed in consultation with nationally renowned medical, child development, and infant mental health researchers and practitioners. Please view "The Science of Attachment" training at this link: <http://centerforchildwelfare.fmhi.usf.edu/videos/Pages/rebrand.aspx#science>.

**PRACTICE GUIDANCE:** Guidelines to Consider in Moving Infants and Young Children

Abundant research demonstrates that babies begin to form a strong attachment to a caregiver at around seven months of age. These attachments form rapidly. From that period of time through age two, moving a child from the caregiver, who is the psychological parent, is emotionally very difficult for the child and should be approached carefully. Disruptions are also difficult for children who are slightly older because they do not have the cognitive ability to understand what is happening or why. According to researchers, the child experiences the removal as a death and suffers through a grieving process made more difficult by the adults' failure to appreciate what is happening.

For this reason, when dealing with young children, the first placement should be the best placement. While kin clearly have an interest in taking care of family members that interest should be expressed and acted on early in the process. A move from a foster

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home to kin has emotional costs and should not be undertaken lightly. These costs are not mitigated by the fact that "the foster parent knew all along that this was the plan," since the child is not capable of knowing or anticipating a change.

The key to good child welfare practice is making decisions that are appropriate for each individual child rather than working according to inflexible rules. Accordingly, this document does not provide "answers" or "rules" for practice, rather it lists factors to be considered when contemplating a move.

1. How old is the child and what developmental tasks is s/he accomplishing? If the child is 6 months of age or younger, it may be better to act sooner rather than later. If the child is a year to two years old, it may be a particularly bad time to move the child.
2. How long has the child lived with the current family? Is this the only family the child has known? Does the child have a healthy attachment to the current foster parent? How does the harm of disrupting a healthy attachment compare to the possible advantage of an extended family placement?
3. What, if any, relationship does the child have with the relative or foster parent who will be taking the child? Children may know the potential caregiver well, or may never have met him or her. The relationship may or may not be positive.
4. Is the foster parent willing to maintain a relationship with the relative while the child lives with the foster parent? Is the relative willing to allow the foster parent to maintain a relationship?
5. What is the transition plan? Is there agreement on its implementation? Is it flexible and adapted based on the child's reactions?
6. What is the new parent's level of commitment to the child? Is the commitment to the child or to the birth parent?
7. How likely is the new placement to succeed?
  - a. History of relationship
  - b. Prior interest in taking the child
  - c. Resources available for the child
  - d. Willingness to participate in supportive activities
  - e. Thoughtfulness about undertaking the responsibility of the placement

**ACTION REQUIRED:** Please ensure wide dissemination to front line staff (investigations and case management) and their supervisors making placement decisions. Managers are encouraged to take opportunities to share this information in staff meetings, on conference calls, in staffings, local training sessions, etc. The goal is to provide critical thinking tools for staff making complex decisions on a routine basis.

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:** If you have additional questions, please contact Gay Frizzell at 850-921-3005 or by email [Gay\\_Frizzell@dcf.state.fl.us](mailto:Gay_Frizzell@dcf.state.fl.us).

cc: Mary Cagle, Children's Legal Services  
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