

Reunification

Practice Notes, Issue #2

February 1998

Welcome to CASCW Practice Notes

This is the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare's second issue of Practice Notes. The publication is designed to assist child welfare practitioners in connecting their practice with research findings. In its first year, Practice Notes will focus on areas of concern that relate to placement permanency. For this issue, we will look at the topic of family reunification.

Family Reunification

The passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act, (P.L. 105 - 89), considered the most important child welfare reform legislation in almost twenty years, shifts attention to children's safety as the paramount concern that must guide all child welfare services. Nevertheless, the goals of family reunification and family preservation are maintained. This new legislation requires expedited permanency planning in a time-limited framework: 12 months. Of the options for permanency, family reunification for a child in out-of-home care continues to be a crucial objective. The underlying assumption remains that in the vast majority of cases, there is no evidence of willful endangerment on the part of the parent, and with the right combination of support and services, parents wish to and can become capable parents (Berliner, 1993). It is imperative that child welfare professionals understand the key elements that maximize chances for successful reunification. Some of those elements that we have identified through a review of the literature are:

- Intensive, family-based services that extend beyond the time the child returns home
- Resolution of the problem that precipitated the child's removal from the home (such as depression, drug addiction, inadequate living space, etc.)
- Service agreements that are mutually developed between parent and child welfare worker
- Interactive parent education and training that engages the parent as a team participant
- Relationship and trusting-building between worker and client, that includes providing hope, giving encouragement, listening, and building self-esteem.

Berliner, L. (1993). Is family preservation in the best interest of children? *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 556-557.

Courtney, M.E. (1995). Reentry to foster care of children returned to their families. *Social Service Review*, 226 - 241.

Risks to reentry in out-of-home care:

- children who enter care as infants
- children in very poor families
- children with a previous history of out-of-home placements

Marcenko, M.O., & Striepe, M.I. (1997). A look at family reunification through the eyes of mothers. *Community Alternatives*, 9 (1), 33 - 48.

This qualitative study looks at a sample of twelve mothers whose children were in out-of-home placement and then reunified. All were low-income women with at least one child less than two years old. Mental health issues or substance abuse were common factors. Using an ethnographic approach, each mother was asked what led to her child's placement out of the home and what factors were helpful in having this child returned home. Based on the women's responses, the critical factors that led to reunification were:

- a mother's motivation for making changes in her situation, driven by love for her kids
- a crisis moment that motivated the mother to change her situation, such as losing her housing a support system of family, friends, or partner
- a connection to spirituality
- treatment, and in these cases, drug treatment
- housing

The authors emphasize from the findings the importance of child protection workers identifying and working with a mother's interest in her child's care, even while that mother is not in a position to provide it. The authors also point out the need for policy-level advocacy regarding housing issues, which were a major barrier to reunification efforts.

Hess, P.M., Folaron, G., & Jefferson, A.B. Effectiveness of family reunification services: An innovative model. *Social Work*, 37 (4), 304 - 311.

With about 29% to 33% of children reentering placement in 1987, the Department of Health and Human Services recognized the failure of the child welfare system to successfully return children to their homes following out-of-home placement. This article features a three-year project funded by DHHS to pilot the Professional Review Action Group (PRAG). The project reviewed cases of unsuccessful family reunification in Indiana. Findings of this pilot concluded that the most common situation resulting in reentry was the non-resolution of the problem that precipitated the child's move from home in the first place. Other factors, such as large caseloads, lack of reunification regulation, staff turn-over, and specific family issues also contributed to reunification failure.

The authors recommend corrective actions such as standardized caseloads, reclassification of roles to appropriately reflect positions, efforts to retain staff and the establishment of reasonable salaries. Other recommended changes related to case assessment requirements, client contact hours, and post-reunification follow-up.

Fein, E., & Staff, I. (1991). Implementing reunification services. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, 72 (6), 335 - 343.

The authors contend that, though treated similarly, family preservation and reunification services and programs are distinct due to the populations each serves. Family preservation programs serve families who fear they will lose their children, so this fear influences their motivation and action. In family reunification programs, motivation is not a central issue, but

rather the agency's ability to effectively address a family's specific problems. Hence, the authors argue that program designs need to reflect these differences.

Casey Family Services (CFS) is an organization serving the New England states. In the summer, 1989, CFS developed a home-based, intensive model called the Reunification Services Program. This program focused on goals and plans and has an on-going evaluative component. After one year, findings regarding goal-setting revealed a need to more clearly define goals. Related to goal-setting, service agreements were found often to be "forced" on parents instead of mutually established. In an attempt not to put children in other risky situations (another foster placement), workers often felt pressure to "reunify" parent and child before the parent or parents were ready to resume full parenting responsibilities. Reconciling the child's need for permanency with the parents' need for rehabilitation time was found to be a formidable challenge.

Despite these difficulties, the authors recommended goal setting and efforts to re-define success that value maintenance and cultivation of parent-child relationship whether the child is living with a parent/parents or is placed elsewhere.

Carlo, P. (1993). Parent education vs. parent involvement: Which type of efforts work best to reunify families? Journal of Social Service Research, 17 (1/2), 135 - 155.

In the interests of exploring what types of reunification efforts are most effective at restoring families, this author compared the outcomes of three types of interventions with families. Conducted at the Five Acres Boys' and Girls' Aid Society of Los Angeles, this study employed instructional and experiential sessions for parents while their children were placed outside their home. Two groups received one type of training each and a third group received both experiential and informational training. To determine success, the study used the Devereux Child Behavior Rating Scale and the Index of Parental Satisfaction with Home Visits to measure behavior towards the child and parent satisfaction with that behavior.

Results of the study indicate that the parent group engaging in both types of learning experiences, instructional learning and supervised interactive experiences with their children, moved towards reunification at a higher rate than either of the other two groups. Each of the three parent groups demonstrated a comparable decrease in inappropriate behavior towards the child as well as comparable satisfaction with the child's behavior.

One explanation offered for the significantly higher reunification rate for the parent group that took part in supervised activities with the child as well as instructional training is that, in this model, the parent was treated as an active contributing team member rather than a passive learner.

Courtney, M.E. (1995). Reentry to foster care of children returned to their families. Social Service Review, 226 - 241.

In a study of foster children returned to their families, this author looks at hazard rates for return to out-of-home placement. He looks at foster care children returned to their homes in California between January and June of 1988, and follows their placement status through June of 1991. Using a "hazard rate model," the study measures risk of return to foster care.

The author found that about 19% of the children returned to out-of-home placement within three years of reunification. However, for over half who were again removed from their homes, this occurred within eight months of leaving foster care. Another significant finding of the study is that about 23% of the children returned to their homes within a month of being in foster care reentered the system.

Regarding child characteristics, the study showed that risk of reentry to foster care is greater for children of poorer families. Also, comparing age groups, risk of reentry to out-of-home care was higher for infants than for the 7 to 12 age group. The hazard rate of reentry was greater for African American children in the study than for their Hispanic and Caucasian counterparts. Those children who had a greater number of previous placements had a higher risk of reentry rate than those in fewer prior out-of-home placements.

The author points out that reunification is not the only assurance of permanence for children and that studies indicate kinship care to be a reliable long-term placement for children. Children placed in kinship care return home at a slower rate than children in other types of foster care placements.

Burford, G., Pennell, J., MacLeod, S., Campbell, S., & Lyall, G. Reunification as an extended family matter. Community Alternatives, 8 (2), 33 - 55.

In this article, the authors describe a model for engaging family members in matters when a child in the family has been abused by another family member. This model, called Family Group Decision Making (FGDM), was tested in three locations in Canada. The process brings all family members together in a discussion around the best long-term arrangement for the child or children who have been harmed. The process emphasizes safety, accountability for the abusive behavior, involvement from all family members, and the belief that many families have the capacity to resolve abuse issues when provided with the appropriate support.

For testing the model, families with some of the most difficult abuse issues were targeted to participate. Intentional efforts were made to involve family members identified by the abused child or adolescent. The project recruited a local coordinator and researcher, and local leadership that had authority within the family's culture.

FGDM is distinct from mediation in that it does not look to the perpetrator and the abused party to resolve a conflict, but works to address the abuse itself and stop it from continuing. After extensive preparation with individual family members, the conference itself consists of

the states of: introductions, information giving, family private deliberations, and formalizing and authorizing the plan. On the average, the conferences lasted for 5 = hours. In all but one of the 38 conferences the family developed a plan, which was accepted by the representing authority as addressing the concerns for family member safety. Because the cost of services already being delivered to these families was high, this approach was not considered to be more costly overall. Extended family members demonstrated a concern for the child/children's safety over reuniting the family.

Benefits found from the study of FGDM include: (quoted from the article)

- the model is simultaneously adaptable to the uniqueness of diverse cultural, family and local traditions while at the same time highly compatible with the aims of justice
- the model, when practiced as described, did not increase risk for abused or vulnerable family members and instead yielded increase sympathy and decreased blame toward victims in the extended family network
- the process stimulated an extensive mobilization of activity in the formal and informal relationships in and around the family resulting in increased levels of understanding and cooperation between investigatory personnel and the family
- high levels of satisfaction with the process were expressed by family members and professionals who participated in a conference
- the model results in some children in placement either returning to their parents or to kinship placements; this reduces the need to place in some instances and keeps family involved in fostering arrangements in others.

Maluccio, A.N., Fein, E., & Davis, I.P. (1994). Family reunification: Research findings, issues, and directions. *Child Welfare*, 73 (5), 489 - 504.

In this research review, the authors point to the need for much more research focused on family reunification services, which they argue will improve the effectiveness of programs and policies that aim at returning children to their home. The writers adopt a definition of family reunification that focuses on contact and relationship-building between children and their family members, but that does not assume a child's return to the home.

A critical point made by the authors, based on cited research, is that successful reunification, measured by long-term return to the home, is as much a result of service delivery characteristics as child and family factors. Services referred to are support services provided before and after a child returns home. Intensive family services have also demonstrated higher reunification rates than standard child welfare services.

In their review of reunification research the authors highlight the need for:

- longitudinal studies that look at programs and outcomes
- a national database on child welfare information that could be used for looking at patterns and program effectiveness studies of specific factors and their impact on reunification, such as substance abuse and poverty

- examining the effects of family reunification that does not set a child's return home as the success measure, but emphasizes cultivation of the relationship between the child and other family members

Lewis, R.E., Walton, E., & Fraser, M.W. (1995). Examining reunification services: A process analysis of a successful experiment. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 5 (3), 259 - 282.

In this article documents the key characteristics of a successful family-based reunification project which used as its model a family preservation project in Utah. This study of the Family Reunification Project (FRP) looked at type and frequency of services provided that resulted in successful outcomes. Types of services were divided into three categories of approaches: relationship, rapport and trust-building efforts; behavioral interventions that worked to address anxiety, self-esteem, and depression issues; and concrete services such as services to address transportation and housing needs.

The study examined how often relationship-building services were used in the reunification project, how often concrete services were extended, amount of time spent with each family, and the goal setting and accomplishment of goals for each family.

Overall, it was found that the family preservation program design was potentially quite useful for family reunification efforts as well, though the authors indicated that further study would be necessary on specific aspects of the design.

- Relationship and trust building between worker and client was an important element.
- Achievement of goals set in a mutually established agreement between parent and worker was found to correlate with the success of services provided.
- Time that the worker spent with a family averaged to be three hours of direct service time per week over a three-month period.

Kamerman, S.B., & Kahn, A.J. (1990). Social services for children, youth, and families in the United States. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 12, 1 - 184.

In this extensive article, one crucial element related to family reunification pointed out by the authors is the need for coordination between crisis-focused services and other long-term support programs provided to families. Studies of families with multiple needs indicate that ongoing, comprehensive services prove more effective when compared to strictly crisis-driven interventions or "episodic approaches" to families of children being mistreated.

Additional Journal Articles:

Courtney, M., & Wong, Y.I. (1996). Comparing the timing of exits from substitute care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 18 (4/5), 307-334.

Davis, I.P., Landsverk, J., Newton, R., & Ganger, W. (1996). Parental visiting and foster care reunification. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 18 (4/5), 363 - 382.

- Fraser, M.W., Walton, E., Lewis, R.E., Pecora, P.J., & Walter, W.K. An experiment in family reunification: Correlates of outcomes at one-year follow-up. *Child and Youth Services Review*, 18 (4/5), 335 - 361.
- Inkelas, M., & Halfon, N. (1997). Recidivism in child protective services. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 19 (3), 139 - 161.
- Petr, C.G., & Enriken, C. (1995). Service system barriers to reunification. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, 523 - 532.

Some Minnesota data related to reunification and out-of-home care :

- Between 1989 & 1993, children in Minnesota spent an increasingly shorter amount of time in out-of-home placement. During that time, children in placement less than one month went from 42% to 54% (Kids Count MN, 1995)
- In 1993, 79% of children who left care were reunited with their parents and another 6% were placed with a relative. The figures for 1989 were 68% of children leaving care returned home and 7% found homes with a relative (MN DHS, 1996).
- Twenty-nine percent of families investigated in 1993 for some type of maltreatment (including neglect) were investigated, though not necessarily placed, again in the same county within thirty-six months (Office of the Legislative Auditor, State of Minnesota, 1998).
- Families originally rated by county investigators as "no" or "low" risk had a lower rate of repeated maltreatment determinations than families rated as "intermediate" or "high" risk, but there was little difference in the rate of repeated maltreatment between intermediate and high-risk families (Office of the Legislative Auditor, State of Minnesota, 1998).
- In 1996, 86% of children brought to the attention of child protective services had only one episode of out-of-home care placement (Children's Defense Fund - Minnesota, 1998).

*MN DHS, (1996). Children in out-of-home placement: A 1993 Minnesota report.

*Minnesota Kids Count (1995). A look at Minnesota children in out-of-home placements. Children's Defense Fund-MN.

*Office of the Legislative Auditor, (1998). Child protective services: A program evaluation report. St. Paul, MN: State of Minnesota.

* Children's Defense Fund-MN, (1998). You should know...CDF-MN releases new report on out-of-home placement. St. Paul, MN: Children's Defense Fund-MN.

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