

Reunification and Relapse Prevention with Child Welfare Families

By

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Reunification

- The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (Public Law 96-272) mandated that reasonable efforts be made to reunify families
- Goal or mission of the child welfare agency
- Reunification is always the goal until it's no longer the goal

Reunification

- Conceptually, reunification is designed to return the family unit to a functioning system in which the child (ren) are no longer at risk of maltreatment.
- Placements are considered temporary until the family unit is restructured to a more productive unit



Reunification

- Alternate placements are intended to be temporary until the family unit can be restructured into a more productive unit.
- So what has happened?





Deconstructing the Issues

- Dynamics and complexity of human problems have caused reunification efforts to be less than short term and often ineffective.
- System interventions are not effective
 - Service plan standards do not meet the needs
 - Resources
 - Inexperienced treatment providers
 - Child Welfare case loads to high

Deconstructing the Issues

- Children placed out-of-home for shorter durations (6 months to 1 year) have higher reunification rates (around 53.7%)
- In contrast, only approximately 26.1% of children placed out-of-home for 25 months or more are reunified.
- https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/migrated_legacy_files//179026/Reunification.pdf

Deconstructing the Issues

- Illinois study noted that one-third of children returned home after the first placement
- 13% returned home after the second placement
- 5% returned home after the third placement
- This same study noted that 40% of the children in foster care had more than three placements
- The longer children stay in care the more likely they will experience multiple placements (Goerge, 1990)

Deconstructing the Issues

- The reasons for child removal impact reunification rates.
- Substance abuse (alone) accounted for 8.5% of removals, white child behavior problems accounted for 4.0% and caretakers' inability to cope accounted for 3.6%
Families that maintain economic connections during child removal have better reunification rates.
- https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/cwo-executive-summary-2020_0.pdf

Deconstructing the Issues

- Families that maintain economic connections during child removal have better reunification rates.
- Families that lost connection during child removal (30%) had lower reunification rates.
- <https://poverty.ucdavis.edu/policy-brief/financial-stability-improves-chances-family-reunification>

Reunification Needs

- Family involvement
- Immediate contact with offending parent in a controlled environment.
- Frequent contact between child and parents
- Family support and encouragement
- Immediate issues and needs addressed: **NO WAITING LISTS**

Reunification Needs

- Experienced service providers working as partners with child welfare specialist, not as case workers
- Experienced service providers skilled in play therapy and family therapy
- Immediate involvement of child and parents in psychotherapy, not when the child “acts out”

Reunification Needs

- Experienced therapists that can spend a great deal of time with the family as well as the child welfare specialist.
- Re-creation of high stimulus environments where parents can interact more normally instead of a controlled office setting.
- Frequent, meaningful contact with child and parents

Reunification Needs

- Strengths assessed AND utilized from the beginning
- 90 day court hearing would have to see a percentage involvement and improvement at least a 30% improvement
 - Every goal on the ISP would have to have a 30% participation or improvement level
 - This would require outside treatment providers to be trained on quantifying services and progress
 - Treatment plans are written to be measurable so this would be actually very easy to monitor

Reunification Needs

- Next 60 day court review should indicate a 50 % participation/improvement level
- Next 60 day court review (six month review) would indicate a 75% participation/improvement level with an aggressive reunification visitation schedule being developed and implemented
- Next 60 days would yield a 100% participation/improvement level with the culmination of the reunification process.

How do We Prevent Relapse?



Relapse Prevention

- If we had followed the previous steps during reunification efforts, relapse would be less likely unless:
 - We no longer provide intense services
 - Resources become limited
 - Follow-up is too short
 - Continued services do not take a different focus

Refocus of Services

- Five techniques or strategies to be utilized:
 - Weekly family therapy to address major stressors (money, resources, activities)
 - Children's therapy to focus on new, healthier environment
 - Family meetings to focus on household roles and responsibilities
 - Encourage continued development and maintenance of resources/support
 - Encourage daily play

Recipe for Success



Recipe for success

- Immediate contact with biological family within 48 hours
- Child Welfare specialist having daily contact with family
- Experienced treatment provider(s)
- Focus on strengths to address needs
- Team work with all parties
- One placement for child
- Consistent, meaningful court reviews
- Measurable success
- Child in out of home placement for less than a year

Q & A's



