

Strengthening Families, Reuniting Children The Role of Reunification in Montana

Understanding the CASA role, legal framework, and best practices in supporting reunification of children in foster care with their family



TRAINING OBJECTIVES

- Understand the importance of reunification.
- Learn legal and procedural frameworks in Montana.
- Identify challenges to reunification.
- Recognize CASA's role in the reunification process.
- Explore best practices and resources for successful reunification.



WHY REUNIFICATION MATTERS

Primary Objective: To restore a child to their biological family in a safe and stable environment.

Preserves Bonds: Maintains essential emotional, cultural, and familial connections.

Legal Mandate: Federal law (e.g., Adoption and Safe Families Act) prioritizes reunification when safe and possible.

Trauma Reduction: Minimizes disruptions that can occur with prolonged separation.



LONG TERM BENEFITS OF FAMILY REUNIFICATION

For the Child:

Stability and Identity: A sense of belonging and self-worth.

Emotional Health: Reduced anxiety and improved mental well-being.

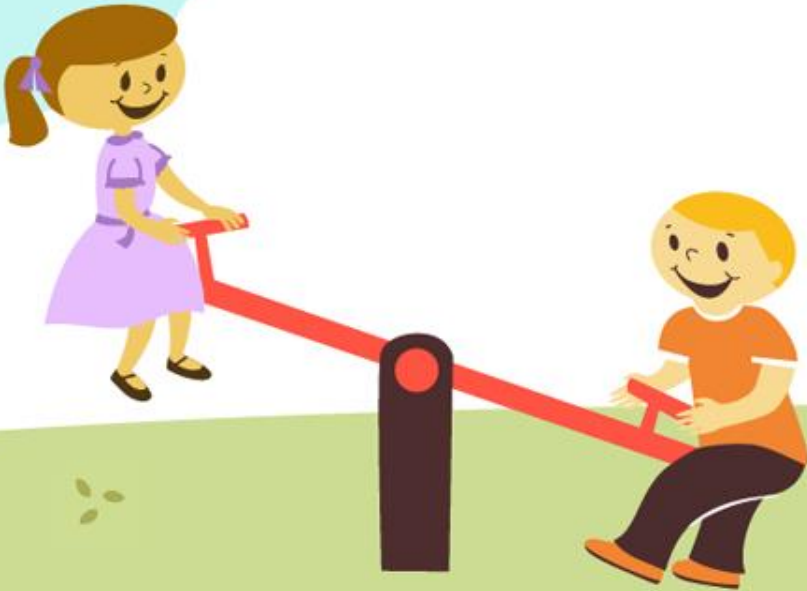
Educational Success: Fewer disruptions in schooling and academic performance.



For the Family:

Healing and Growth: Opportunities to address challenges and strengthen relationships.

Economic Stability: Avoids long-term costs associated with alternative placements.



For the Community:

Stronger Families: Leads to more resilient community networks.

Cost Efficiency: Reduces reliance on long-term foster care and social services.

Better Outcomes: Fewer children at risk of future homelessness or incarceration.



FEDERAL LAWS GUIDING REUNIFICATION

Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA):

Encourages reunification as the primary goal when it is safe.

Mandates timely permanency planning for children in foster care.

Requires efforts for family reunification unless aggravating circumstances (e.g., abuse, neglect) prevent it.

Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA):

Provides additional protections for Native American children, emphasizing family and tribal connections.



MONTANA STATE LAWS AND FRAMEWORK

Montana Child Abuse and Neglect Laws (MCA 41-3):

Establishes procedures for child protection cases, including timelines for reunification efforts.

Requires the Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) to provide services to families to facilitate safe reunification.



Reasonable Efforts Requirement:

The state must demonstrate "reasonable efforts" to prevent removal and work toward reunification, such as:

Parenting classes.

Substance abuse treatment.

Family counseling.



Timelines for Reunification:

A child may remain in foster care while parents work on a case plan.

Montana generally follows federal guidelines:

A permanency hearing must occur within 12 months of a child entering foster care.

Termination of parental rights is pursued if reunification is not achieved within 15 of the last 22 months, unless exceptions apply.



REUNIFICATION PROCESS IN MONTANA

Case Plan Development:

DPHHS collaborates with families to create a case plan addressing the reasons for removal.

Includes measurable goals and timelines (e.g., substance abuse recovery, stable housing). (TREATMENT PLAN)



Support Services:

Families are provided with resources to address specific challenges:

Mental health services.

Housing assistance.

Job training.



Monitoring Progress:

Parents must demonstrate progress in fulfilling their case plan.

Regular court reviews assess the family's readiness for reunification.



Trial Home Visits:

A transitional phase where the child is returned home under DPHHS supervision.

Ensures stability before full reunification.



CHALLENGES TO REUNIFICATION

- Parental non-compliance with the case or treatment plan.
- Safety concerns that persist despite interventions.
- Situations involving severe abuse or neglect, where reunification may not be pursued.

WHAT IS CASA'S ROLE



Advocacy for the Child:

CASA volunteers provide unbiased recommendations to the court based on the child's needs.

Focus on ensuring a safe and nurturing environment for the child.



Monitoring Progress:

Monitor the parents' compliance with the reunification case plan.

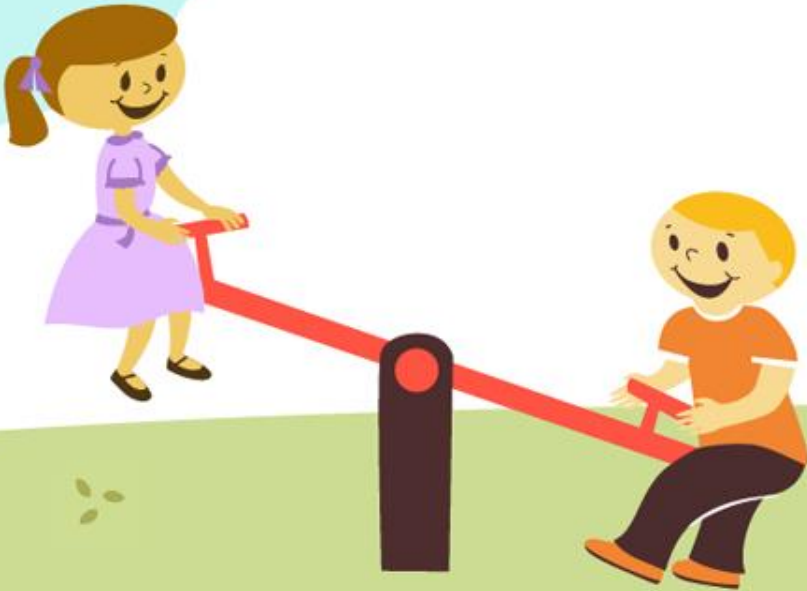
Report to the court on the child's well-being and any concerns during visits or trial home placements.



Facilitating Communication:

Act as a bridge between the child, family, and various stakeholders (e.g., caseworkers, therapists, educators).

Help clarify the child's perspective and wishes.



BEST PRACTICES FOR REUNIFICATION

Collaborative Case Planning

- Include parents, children, caseworkers, and advocates in the planning process.
- Establish clear, achievable goals with measurable benchmarks.

Early and Intensive Interventions

- Address root causes of removal (e.g., substance abuse, mental health issues).
- Provide access to evidence-based services like counseling or parenting programs.



Regular Family Contact

- Facilitate consistent and meaningful parent-child visits.
- Offer coaching and supervision to support positive interactions.

Continuous Monitoring and Support

- Regular progress evaluations to ensure goals are being met.
- Adjust case plans as necessary to reflect family needs and circumstances.

Trauma-Informed Care

- Recognize and address the emotional impact of separation and reunification.
- Provide both parents and children with mental health resources.



CONCLUSION & KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Reunification is the Ideal Goal:** It's the preferred solution when possible, focusing on safety and stability.
- **CASA's Vital Role:** Advocating for the child's best interests and supporting both children and families.
- **Challenges Are Real:** But with the right resources, planning, and advocacy, successful reunification is possible.



CASA STORY

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUfYGE mz8-M>

