

PRACTICE NOTES

For North Carolina's Child Welfare Workers

From the NC Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program

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This publication for child welfare professionals is produced by the North Carolina Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program, part of the Jordan Institute for Families within the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In summarizing research, we try to give you new ideas for refining your practice. However, this publication is not intended to replace child welfare training, regular supervision, or peer consultation—only to enhance them.

Let us hear from you!

To comment about something that appears in Practice Notes, please contact: John McMahon
Jordan Institute for Families
School of Social Work
UNC-Chapel Hill
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3550
jdmcmaho@unc.edu

Newsletter Staff

Mellicent Blythe
John McMahon
Laura Phipps
Tiffany Price

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Family Reunification in North Carolina

When we place children in foster care, almost always our goal is for them to return home. This is our goal because it is a key part of federal and state law and child welfare policy. It's also our goal because it's the right thing to do.

North Carolina's child welfare system is family-centered, and one of the key principles of this approach is that children have a right to their families.

We do a lot to back up our commitment to this principle. We work hard to engage families and help them connect to resources and make the changes they need to be able to safely parent their children again.

Reunification in North Carolina: How Are We Doing?

As child welfare professionals, it helps us to understand what happens to children and families involved with the child welfare system. Below you'll find some key things you should know about the reunification of children in foster care in North Carolina.

Reunification is the most likely outcome for children placed in foster care. In 2011, of the 4,805 children who left foster care in our state, 2,234 (46.5%) were reunified with their families. Figure 1 illustrates the different destinations of the children who left foster care in North Carolina in 2011.

Reunification is somewhat less likely than it was in 2007. The percentage of children leaving foster care through reunification declined from 50.1% in 2007 to 46.5% in 2011. During this same period the percentage of exits to adoption increased slightly, from 24.2% to 26.5%, while exits to "other" rose from 11% to 14.2%. "Other" is a category that includes emancipation, transfer to another agency, runaway, or death of child.

IN NORTH CAROLINA WE BELIEVE . . .

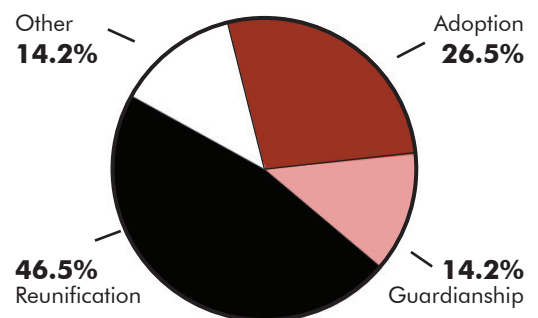
. . . the family is the fundamental resource for the nurturing of children, that children have a right to their own families, and that parents should be supported in their efforts to care for their children in ways that assure the safety and well-being of the child. . . . A crisis can be an opportunity for change. . . . It is our job to instill hope because even families who feel hopeless can grow and change.

Excerpt from policy (NCDSS, 2008a)

In this issue of *Practice Notes* we'll share with you information and ideas we hope will be helpful to you in your efforts to bring about family reunifications that are timely, successful, and lasting. ♦

FIGURE 1

Destination of NC Children Leaving Foster Care in 2011



Emancipations account for most exits in this category.

When it occurs, reunification usually happens in less than 12 months. Of the North Carolina children reunified in 2011, 55.8% spent less than 12 months in foster care. This percent falls short of the national median of 69.9%. Figure 2 (next page) illustrates the amount of time the NC children who were reunified in *continued next page*

Unless stated otherwise, this article is based on data provided by the US Children's Bureau [USDHHS, 2013]. The most recent year for which the federal government has complete statistics related to reunification is 2011.

Reunification in North Carolina: How Are We Doing? continued from previous page

2011 spent in foster care before returning home.

Time to reunification is improving. Of the North Carolina children in foster care who were reunified in 2009, 52.3% were reunified in less than 12 months. By 2011 our performance on this measure had increased to 55.8%. Although this is encouraging, our state lags behind most of the country when it comes to reunification within 12 months (Duncan, 2012).

Reunification becomes less likely the longer children are in care. For example, of the children who entered foster care in state fiscal year 2009-10 and spent less than a year in custody, half were reunified. By contrast, just 20% of those who spent more than 2 years in custody were reunified with their families (Duncan, et al., 2013).

Small counties are not doing as well on reunification. Children in the custody of small NC counties are less likely to be reunified in 12 months than other children in foster care. While there has been considerable variation in the performance of large and mid-size counties since 2000, as Figure 3 illustrates, during this time small counties consistently lagged behind on exits to reunification within 12 months (Duncan, et al., 2013).

Given this fact, it is not surprising that in small counties children typically spend more time in foster care before being reunified. Since 2000, children in small counties exiting to reunification spend about 10.5 months in foster care—well above the federal median of 6.5 months (Duncan, et al., 2013; USDHHS, 2012).

Reunification was not equally likely for children of all races/ethnicities in North Carolina in 2011. Although reunification was the most likely outcome for children of all races in 2011, White (non-Hispanic) children were somewhat more likely to be reunified than Black (non-Hispanic) children (46.8% vs. 44.2%), while Hispanic children (any race) were reunified more often than White children (53.8% vs. 46.8%).

North Carolina performs quite well on re-entry into foster care. Although children in our state are not reunified as swiftly as in other states, very few re-enter foster care.

In 2011, only 2.3% of children entering foster care in North Carolina had been in foster care during the preceding 12 months. As Figure 4 illustrates, this is significantly lower than the national median for this performance measure. This suggests North Carolina does a better job than many states of ensuring that sufficient changes have occurred in birth families before children return home and/or that sufficient post-reunification services are provided. ♦

FIGURE 2

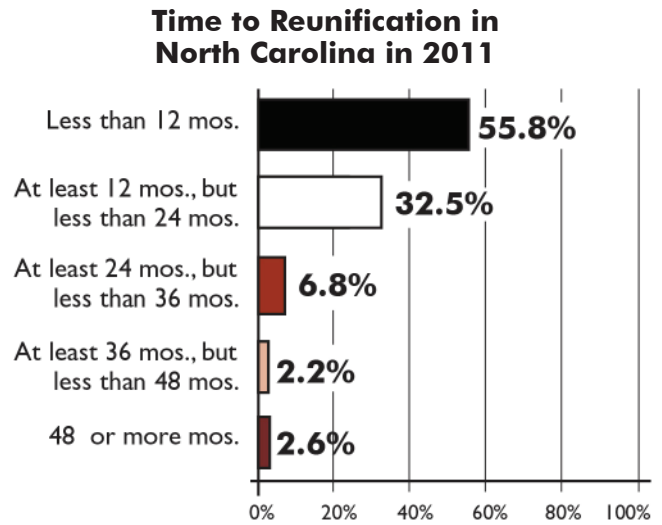


FIGURE 3

Exits to Reunification within 12 Months by NC County Size

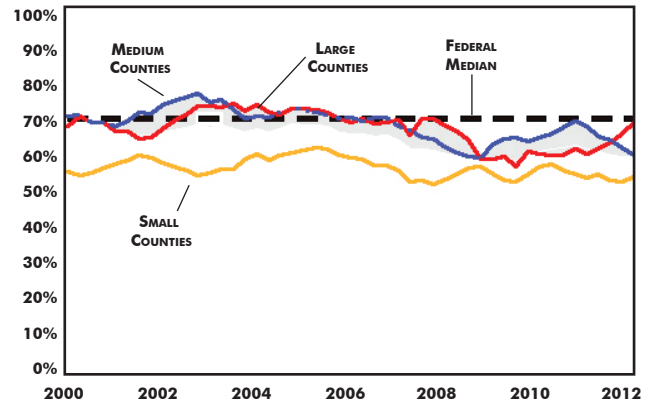
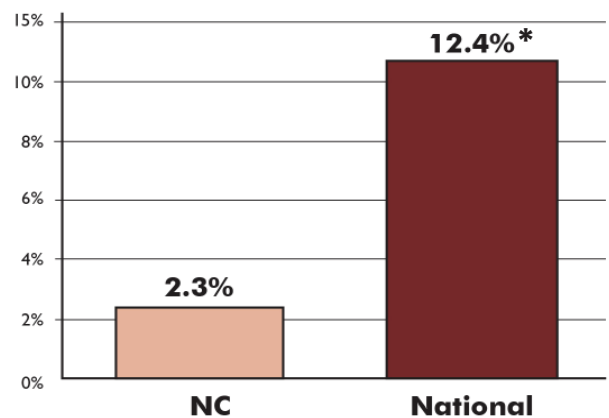


FIGURE 4

Reunified Children Who Re-Entered Care within 12 Months in 2011



* The 2011 national median is not yet available; this is the median for 2010

North Carolina Is Changing Its Family Reunification Program

Starting July 1, 2013, North Carolina is changing its program to help reunify children in foster care with their families.

Underutilization

In the past, reunification services in North Carolina have been provided through the Intensive Family Reunification Services (IFRS) program. Under this program, community-based agencies across the state provided reunification services to foster care-involved families referred to them by county departments of social services.

Unlike its successful sister program, North Carolina's Intensive Family Preservation Services Program, IFRS has struggled for years with underutilization. In other words, county department of social services (DSS) agencies have referred too few families to IFRS providers. According to information gathered by the Division of Social Services, the timeframe requirement for referrals and services is the most common reason DSS agencies have not been using IFRS.

Whatever the cause, underutilization is a serious problem. After all, reunification services are clearly needed: as discussed elsewhere in this issue, as a state we need to improve our performance in this area. Furthermore, underutilization is wasteful. In the most recent 3-year funding cycle, an estimated \$2.5 million in federal funding for reunification services went unspent due to lack of referrals.

Addressing the Problem

To fix this problem, in 2012 the Division of Social Services obtained feedback from IFRS providers and convened a workgroup of county DSS staff. The conclusion they reached was that the IFRS program needed to be restructured to allow more flexibility in referral and service timeframes.

In partnership with the NC Association of County Directors of Social Services (NCACDSS), the Division formed a workgroup to restructure the

It is hoped that through this new approach more families and children who need reunification services will receive them.

IFRS program. The result is a new approach that gives county DSS agencies more control over the delivery of reunification services.

New Name, Same Goals

When it debuts July 1, North Carolina's reunification program will operate under a new name: Time-Limited Family Reunification Services.

Like IFRS, the new program will be evaluated based on its ability to achieve the following outcomes: (1) percentage of youth who achieve permanency through reunification within 12 months; and (2) annual percent of children experiencing re-entries into foster care within 12 months of their discharge.

Important Differences

Separation from IFPS. Starting July 1, family reunification services will no longer be contracted in combination with Intensive Family Preservation Services (IFPS). (*The IFPS program will continue unchanged.*)

New Funding Approach. Starting July 1, family reunification service funds will be allocated by the Division of Social Services directly to all local county DSS agencies.

To determine the amount each county will get, the Division will use a formula that was developed in partnership with and approved by the NCACDSS. Based on this formula, of the \$1.4 million available in the upcoming state fiscal year, the 100 county DSS agencies will receive varying amounts, ranging from \$3,000 to approximately \$95,000.

New Role for DSS Agencies. County DSS agencies will be responsible for developing a plan to use funds from this new program to provide time-limited reunification services in their community. Per federal requirements, these services may only be provided for the purpose of reunification (not foster care maintenance) within 15 months from the date the child en-

tered foster care. Activities that can be provided with these funds include:

1. Individual, group, and family counseling;
2. Inpatient, residential, or outpatient substance abuse treatment services;
3. Mental health services;
4. Assistance to address domestic violence;
5. Services to provide temporary child care and therapeutic services for families, including crisis nurseries;
6. Peer-to-peer mentoring and support groups for parents and primary caregivers;
7. Services and activities designed to facilitate access to and visitation of children by parents and siblings;
8. Transportation to or from any of the above services and activities.

New Policy

The Division is working to revise North Carolina's reunification policy to be consistent with changes to the program. Expect the new policy, when it appears, to closely mirror the timeframes and other federal requirements for time-limited family reunification services, which are described in Title IV-B, Subpart 2 of the Social Security Act (http://www.ssa.gov/OP_Home/ssact/title04/0431.htm).

For More Information

Contact the Division's Michelle Reines (Michelle.reines@dhhs.nc.gov; 919/334-1089). ♦

Implications for . . .

- **Families and Children.** If the new program works as anticipated, more of the families and children who need reunification services will receive them, which could lead to a greater number of safe, timely, lasting reunifications.
- **County DSS Agencies.** To benefit from the new program, agencies will want to engage their staff, community partners, and the families they serve to assess the areas of greatest need and develop a plan for using time-limited reunification funds to improve outcomes for children and families.

Reunification: Focusing on the Process

It's about a family coming back together and rebuilding over time

I could not wait for that day. I was preparing myself for what to say and do. Should I run and hug them or should I wait for them to come to me? Butterflies were inside my stomach.

— Tracey Carter (2006)

For parents anticipating a child's return home from foster or kinship care, reunification holds much promise. It's a new start—a milestone that marks their having reached an important goal.

But for families and workers alike, it's important to see reunification as a process, not an event. It's a time of change and adjustment, discovery and challenge.

There are no guarantees of success. It is estimated that nationally 25% of reunified children return to foster care at some point (CWIG, 2011).

As social workers, it's our job to keep our eyes on the process so that when children return home, they get to stay.

A Culture of Encouragement

Many parents need to know that their children **can** return home. It sounds basic, but some parents have internalized feelings of failure, doubt, or guilt that make it hard for them to see that reunification is truly possible.

In a study that interviewed parents who had successfully reunified, "Every parent told of the huge impact of having someone believing in him or her and saying, 'you can do this. You can get your kids back'" (Catalyst for Kids, 2006). Some parents said it also helped to see others reunited with their children.

Child welfare workers and supervisors can build a culture of encouragement by using language that affirms parents' abilities and goals, connecting parents to mentors who have had children returned home, sharing information about the number of children who have returned home that year, and focusing with parents on their strengths.

A focus on strengths gives parents hope and helps social workers assess readiness for reunification and how well families are doing after children are back home.

Assessment

Families have said the following strengths were essential to their ability to reunify, remain intact, and maintain healthy functioning: commitment, insight, communication, humor, initiative, boundary setting, creativity, flexibility, social support (receiving and giving), and spirituality (Lietz & Strength, 2011). This list underscores how important it is for us to identify and emphasize family strengths. It also provides some guidance for skills and resources that you can focus on in your case planning with families.

We also need to be aware of factors that can elevate risk for re-entry into care, such as "the number and type of stressors that would be present if the child returned home" (American Humane Association, 2012). It can be hard for workers to know when there's been enough improvement in the family's situation.

At the same time, we want to be careful not to unfairly raise the bar. Parents don't need to be perfect to get their children back. Families should be reunited when risk has been reduced and the home is safe. We can increase our confidence in a decision to reunify if we use North Carolina's Family Reunification Assessment (DSS-5227) in conjunction with good supervision and work closely with families to prepare for reunification.

Intensive Preparation

What do parents need to be thinking about to prepare for their children's

CAUTION: DON'T LET YOUR PERSONAL VALUES INTERFERE WITH REUNIFICATION

An Excerpt from North Carolina policy

The primary consideration for the child's return home should be whether or not the child can be assured of at least a minimally sufficient level of care. Society can require that parents provide this level of basic care, and the County Department of Social Services has been given the authority to intervene when that level of care is not provided. Conversely, social workers should recognize that personal values can lead them to feel that children deserve the "better" life offered by placement than can ever be provided by the parents. Social workers should be careful that their personal standards do not cloud their professional judgment about removal or decisions about reunification (NCDSS, 2009).

transition back home? How can social workers help parents get ready?

Housing

A family's physical home environment can have a big influence on the success of reunification efforts. According to Miller and colleagues (2006):

The overall quality of the physical home environment was significantly linked with success of reunification. Children were more likely to stay reunified in homes that were rated by observers as well kept and not cramped. Access to stimulating play options was significantly positively linked with success of reunification. Children rated by observers as having greater access within their immediate home environment to child-oriented play options such as books, puzzles, and balls were more likely to stay reunified.

Social workers are vital partners in helping a family find and afford housing, and in making sure the physical environment in the home is appropriate. We can do this by:

- Advocating for appropriate housing for families
- Helping families rearrange and use available space differently. This may involve providing families with concrete resources such as developmentally appropriate games and books—some families don't know what is appropriate or helpful for children's devel-

opment and for building a more positive relationship, and may not know to provide space for this in the home.

- Helping families identify and use community resources that provide good space for family activities, such as quality day care, parks, libraries, community centers, and church-based activities.

Rather than penalize parents for housing resources they don't have, our system can recognize when parents are working to meet their children's developmental needs despite housing problems.

SOCIAL SUPPORTS

Another concrete way parents prepare for reunification is to build a strong, ample support network. Social workers should use the time prior to reunification to explore and plan with parents the types and levels of support the family will need to maintain a successful reunification.

Completing a visual tool with a family, such as a genogram or a schedule of a parent's typical day, can be especially helpful at this point, since it allows parents to visualize what help they have, what help they need, and how to fill in the gaps. Don't forget to ask parents which social supports they would like at each CFT, since this might change over time.

PARENTING SKILLS

Before reunification, therapy and other formal supports will be valuable for many families, as will supports that help parents learn and use effective parenting skills. Parents need information that will help them understand the kinds of behaviors they may see once children come home, and practical skills for helping children manage behavior, as well as respite services.

EMOTIONAL PREPARATION

Preparing for reunification also means learning about the emotional

side of reunification and coming to terms with what that experience might be like for different family members.

It's common for parents and children to have a mix of feelings about the upcoming transition—excitement, relief, joy, ambivalence, anxiety, stress, hope, anger, and insecurity. Parents and children may not be ready or willing to talk with a social worker about their feelings, but social workers can nonetheless explain to all family members that it's normal and OK to feel a wide range of emotions.

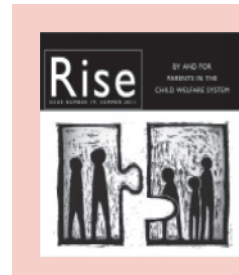
SETTING EXPECTATIONS

Workers should help parents examine their expectations about reunifying.

Do parents envision that children will forget about the time they spent in foster care? Or do they think their children will miss living with their aunt and uncle or foster family? Do they picture their family bonding right away, or do they think it will take time?

The following points from RISE magazine (2006, 2012) highlight some of the realities of reunification.

- Though it's good, reunification is a big change. When children come home, everyone wants things to be positive. But usually parents and children have such strong feelings that it's not easy. Children may be angry at their parents. There can be confusing emotions and tensions, both for children and parents.
- After being apart it can take time to get to know—and trust—each other again. Parents who've been to rehab, therapy, or parenting classes have changed, and their children have had experiences in care that their parents don't know about or understand.
- There may be new siblings at home that the children don't know;



Rise is a magazine written by and for parents affected by the child welfare system. Issues are available free at www.risemagazine.org. If parents don't have Internet access at home, the public library is a reliable Internet source and provides printing services at low cost.

it can take time to get to know one another.

- Sometimes, parents feel rejected. The parents have all of their hopes pinned on reunion. But then, because the child is angry or traumatized, the child misbehaves, and the parent in turn feels angry and let down.
- A lot of parents convince themselves that being in foster care was no big deal for their child. It can be hard for them to remember that a child's sense of security can be shaken by foster care, and that the child may need extra support, security, understanding, and patience when he comes home.

Social workers can and should introduce and explore these themes with families prior to reunification, but sometimes a parent can't really understand them until after reunification when they have spent time as a family and can reflect on their experiences. That's why reunification is a process—it's about a family coming back together and rebuilding over time.

To help prepare families as best they can, social workers may find it helpful to share issues of RISE (see box above) with parents to help open conversation, adjust expectations, and normalize reactions.

Support After Reunification

Parents often need help understanding and working through their children's reactions, responding to children's physical and behavioral needs, and dealing with the stress of unforeseen challenges. Studies tell us that the fol-

lowing kinds of support and services are closely connected with reunifications that last:

- Provision of information and services to parents by the child’s primary service provider (Miller et al.)
- Special educational services for the child (Miller et al.)
- Therapy (Miller et al.) and intensive family-based services (Dougherty, 2004)
- Coaching and information for parents about children’s developmental stages (Catalyst, 2006)
- Housing support (Catalyst, 2006)
- Paid child care or respite (Catalyst, 2006)

The child welfare worker’s involvement with a family should continue for some time after reunification to ensure the family’s needs are addressed and that the child is safe.

Parents may feel conflicted about this. When they are struggling, they may want a social worker’s help, but they may also fear it could jeopardize

Research suggests that after reunification parents are more receptive to practical help than anything that looks like monitoring.

permanency if they appear to have difficulties. They may long for respite care to give them a break, but shy away because of a “perceived pressure not to slip up again” (Malet et al., 2010). It’s up to social workers to let families know they can check back anytime without being stigmatized.

Parents may resist involving a social worker for another reason: “After complying with case plans that may have required significant life changes in order to regain custody of their children, birth parents may simply want to end any involvement with the child welfare system” (Dougherty, 2004). Some parents want to be done with the system the moment a child comes home. Others see the value of continued services, such as this parent:

My six months came and went (after reunification), and they said now we can close your file, and I didn’t want them to. Part of it was kind of my security. I knew they were watching me so I wouldn’t go out and do something stupid (Catalyst for Kids, 2006).

Research indicates that after reunification parents may be more receptive to and satisfied with practical help (such as financial support, transportation, and respite) and less interested in anything that looks to them like statutory visits for the purposes of monitoring families (Broadhurst & Pendleton, 2007).

With this in mind, social workers should examine their efforts, making sure they assist with concrete support and coaching that the family acknowledges has value for them. Even if a worker’s efforts are rejected, there may come a time after the reunification “honeymoon period” when a worker’s involvement is exactly what’s needed to keep the child at home.

Conclusion

Workers serve families well throughout reunification by being accessible and knowledgeable, by helping families plan and work through challenges, and by encouraging and focusing on strengths as families rebuild.

It’s not an easy process, but it can yield great rewards. ♦

Reunification and Collaboration with the Courts

Courts have an essential role in determining if and when parents are reunited with their children. When the court and agency approach reunification collaboratively, they present a single, coherent path for families to follow in order to regain custody of their children. Some strategies for such collaboration include:

- **Cross-system, joint, and multidisciplinary training**, with trainers from both systems, helps staff in both systems understand their roles in achieving shared outcomes, expands communication, builds respect and trust, and breaks down resistance to working together. Implementation projects of the Court Improvement Project (<http://apps.americanbar.org/abanet/child/natsum/nationalcat.cfm?catid=15&subid=46>) reveal a wide range of subjects being pursued through collaborative training efforts.
- **Sharing data** enables both systems to understand roadblocks to timely reunification and allows managers and court personnel to work creatively to overcome those challenges. Other benefits are described in a New York Court Improvement Project report at <http://www.courts.state.ny.us/ip/cw-cip/Publications/BuildingBridges-TheCaseForDataShare.pdf>.

- **Permanency mediation**, adopted by many agencies and courts, allows agency representatives and families to work with a neutral facilitator to arrive at a mutually acceptable plan.



- **Competent legal representation** for parents is associated with the achievement of timely reunification. Collaboration among courts, agencies, and parent groups can improve outcomes for children and families, as they have in States including Washington (http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/center_on_children_and_the_law/parentrepresentation/prp_social_worker_practice_standards_final.pdf) and New York (http://www.cfrny.org/new_legal.asp). The National Project to Improve Representation for Parents in the Child Welfare System (http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/center_on_children_and_the_law/parentrepresentation/project_description.authcheckdam.doc) is seeking to improve parent representation.

For more on this subject, see Maine’s *Collaboration With the Courts: Trainer’s Guide* at <http://bit.ly/17urnrm>.

Reprinted from the Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012

Working with Families Who Are “Stuck”

Child welfare work is tough. Because the safety, permanence, and well-being of children are at stake, there can be a great deal of pressure to act decisively and get results quickly. At the same time, most families we work with face complex challenges that defy simple solutions.

For proof that child welfare work is hard, consider the phenomenon of families who get “stuck.” Typically, the situation looks like this: (1) a case decision has been reached, requiring involuntary services for the family; (2) the family and DSS have developed a case plan; and (3) there is a distinct lack of progress on the issues that caused the family to become involved with DSS in the first place.

In other words, there is a plan, but it is not being implemented. Time is passing, but things aren’t getting better. The day when DSS is out of the family’s life seems to be getting no closer.

In this situation, family members are often resentful, defiant, passive aggressive, and/or defensive toward the agency. They know things are not working. They anticipate criticism and may feel despair. For their part, child welfare workers may feel disappointed, frustrated, and pessimistic about the family’s future.

Suggestions for Getting Unstuck

Here are some suggestions, drawn from Turnell and Edwards (1999) and other sources, for working with families who are stuck.

1. Withhold judgment. The idea that “judgments can wait” is one of North Carolina’s family-centered principles of partnership. It is also a great challenge. When you feel you have done all you can on behalf of a family, it can be extremely frustrating if it appears the family is not holding up their end of the “bargain.” However, don’t give in to the natural impulse to assign blame. Restrain your expectations. Keep an open mind regarding the family’s motives. There are many reasons why a family might not work towards the stated case goals. Until a family can share with you their true fears and motivations, progress is unlikely. If you avoid appearing critical, you may increase the likelihood that a family will open up to you and real progress can take place.

2. Look for positive intent. Families often do what they do (and don’t do) in order to meet some need they have. Find this positive intent and then help the family use it to get things moving in the right direction.

“Stuck” means the family and agency are caught in a cycle of repeatedly doing something that is not working.



3. Focus carefully on details. This will help ensure you do not overlook subtle changes or signs of progress. It may also help you identify new things to try. A family may have some small detail they are willing to work on that seems relatively unimportant to you—but it may be crucial to building rapport and increasing their motivation for bigger changes.

4. Consult your supervisor and/or peers. As soon as you notice yourself feeling frustrated, disappointed, or pessimistic

about working with a family, talk to your supervisor and other social workers in your agency. Timely consultation and hearing varied perspectives can help generate ideas for achieving progress and renew your enthusiasm and sense of possibilities.

5. Be clear on the fundamentals. Review the situation. Are you clear about the purpose of your involvement with the family? Do you have clear and reasonable criteria for case closure? Sometimes a case appears “stuck” because, although the family may have continuing needs, safety and CPS issues have been addressed. When this happens, the case should be closed because the issues that remain are better left to community resources.

6. Own your part in things. When a family seems resistant, they are in part resisting or reacting to your relationship with them. Acknowledge to the family that your partnership has gotten stuck and ask how to get it back on track. If your agency has been wrong or missed something, admit it. If what the agency is doing clearly isn’t helping the family, let them know that you know. Sometimes an admission of this kind can change the power differential with the family just enough to spark or rebuild cooperation.

7. Hold a family-led review of the situation. When the family is stuck, we need to find what will work for them. The best way to do that is to ask them. This can be done in a discussion with the family and the caseworker, or in a Child and Family Team meeting (CFT).

8. Do something different. When a family gets stuck, it is a cue that we need to change strategies (Miller & Rollnick, 1991). Don’t try to solve problems with solutions that aren’t working. If what you are doing (e.g., current case plan) doesn’t work, don’t do it again. Do something different. Ask the family their ideas again about what they want to change and how they think you can help. Once you know what works, do more of it (deShazer & Berg, 1995). ♦

Reprinted from NC’s MRS newsletter v. 4, n. 2 (NCDSS, 2008b)

Addressing Shared Parenting Difficulties as Reunification Approaches

Although successful shared parenting can do a lot ease the transition for the child and birth family as reunification approaches, anecdotal reports suggest that NC child welfare agencies sometimes struggle with the practice at this juncture.

It's easy to see why. As safety issues are addressed, children start spending more time with their parents, which means more handoffs and mini-transitions (e.g., for overnight visits with parents). Many foster families are concerned and upset when the birth parents keep the children up late, feed them junk food, or fail to enforce the foster home's rules and expectations.

The tensions that naturally arise between birth and foster parents can be managed. Here are some suggestions for making shared parenting work at this time of transition:

- Make it clear to foster parents you understand that their feelings and objections are motivated by concern for the children. Normalize their frustration, anxiety, and other feelings.
- Reiterate to foster parents your appreciation for the gift they are giving children and their families by being part of the team that helps birth parents become better able to nurture and protect the child.
- Coach foster parents to continue sending the message to birth families that their goal is to help the children return home. ♦

SHARED PARENTING

- An alliance among important people in the child's life.
- A meeting. Policy requires agencies arrange a face-to-face meeting between birth and foster families within 7 days of placement.
- An ongoing process that often involves a continuum of contact between foster parents, birth parents, and children in foster care.

SHARED PARENTING IS NC POLICY

Shared parenting is an "inclusive practice," which means the birth parent is integrated into the child's life while the child is in out-of-home care. According to Leathers (2002), inclusive practice:

. . . encourages or requires birth parents to participate in the direct care of the child whenever possible by allowing them to have access to the child through informal visiting and other contacts. . . .

In the inclusive practice model, the foster parent functions as a temporary caregiver for the child and a supportive role model to the parent (Landy & Munro, 1998). Advocates of inclusive practice argue it results in increased parental visiting, is less disruptive for the child, and results in fewer attachment conflicts and placement disruptions (Palmer, 1995, 1996).

The Division of Social Services has integrated shared parenting into training for child welfare staff and foster parents; in addition, ten pages of our state's child welfare policy are devoted to the topic (<http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/manuals/dss/csm-10/chg/CSs1201c11.pdf>).

Adapted from NC's MRS newsletter, Vol. 7, No. 2 (NCDSS, 2011)

Child Welfare Training Related to Reunification

NORTH CAROLINA RESOURCES

The NC Division of Social Services offers a number of courses that help child welfare professionals from NC county DSS agencies reunify children in foster care with their families, including the following:

- *Coaching in the Kitchen: Guiding Parents through Teachable Moments*
- *Connecting with Families: Family Support in Practice*
- *CPS In-Home Child Welfare Services*
- *Motivating Substance Abusing Families to Change*
- *Placement in Child Welfare Services*
- *Reasonable Efforts: What Supervisors Need to Know*
- *Shared Parenting*
- *Step by Step: An Introduction to Child and Family Teams*
- *The ABC's of Including Children in Child and Family Teams*

To learn more or to register for these courses go to www.ncswlearn.org.

NATIONAL RESOURCES

Adapted from CWIG, 2013

Family Reunification and Case Closure in Child Sexual Abuse Cases. Reviews safety issues during the reunification process, key ingredients needed in a safety plan; critical treatment milestones for the victim, perpetrator, and family; and the process for reunifying a family and closing a case. Online: <http://bit.ly/104O94T>

Family Reunification Through Visitation. Examines knowledge related to the development of successful visitation plans and strategies to enhance caregiver involvement in the visitation process so that families may have better opportunities to achieve reunification. Online: <http://bit.ly/16fGODS>

Introduction to Parent-Child Visits. Provides a self-guided online training course for child welfare and related professionals to improve outcomes through parent-child visits and enhance efforts toward fam-

ily reunification. Online: <http://training.childwelfare.gov/oltMain.cfm?z=z>

Lighting the Fire of Urgency: Reunification of Families in America's Child Welfare System [Teleconference]. Provides participants with information and tools to quickly identify and engage relatives in order to promote the reunification of children and youth in the child welfare system with their families. Online: <http://www.nrcpfc.org/webcasts/7.html>

The Relationship Between Reunification Services, Service Utilization, and Successful Reunification: An Empirically Based Curriculum. Reviews the history of reunification services, how services are ordered for and used by parents, and how service use influences reunification outcomes. Online: <http://www.csulb.edu/projects/ccwrl/D%27Andrade%20Curriculum%201023.pdf>

Continued Contact with Resource Parents After Reunification

With a change in where a child lives comes a change in the amount of contact a child has with caregivers. There is a redevelopment or shift in roles and relationships. This can be difficult for everyone involved.

One of the issues that comes to the forefront is how much continued contact foster parents and other carers should have with the family after reunification.

As child welfare professionals, how do we help families when there are differences in how much contact family members want with the foster family? How do we know when contact should be scaled back or stopped?

Differing Birth Parent Perspectives

Parents can have very different attitudes and desires about continued contact. Many are so relieved and excited to have their children home that the primary thought running through their minds is that they are ready to be the parent they have worked so hard to be. They are ready to take on their full role as parents and don't see a place for foster parents in the picture.

Other parents feel a current of uncertainty, and wonder if they could use some help from the resource parents. As the following excerpt from a birth mother indicates, still others have grown very attached to the resource parents and want them to continue to be a part of their lives.

In the months after my daughter came home, her foster family continued to show love to us both. I called her foster mother once and said, "Why isn't this child eating?" We realized that Ebony was used to Spanish food and I cook black people food. She taught me to cook pastelitos and peas and rice. Today my daughter is 10 and her former foster mother is still part of our lives. She often babysits since I'm working and going to school, and Ebony stays with her in the summers (Chambers, 2009).

Clearly, for some reunified families, continued contact with resource parents has benefits for everyone, especially the children.

Of course, most relationships between resource parents and reunified families change over time. For example, a parent that was receptive to weekly foster parent phone calls in the first few months after a child returned home may feel later on that the continued contact is holding her family back from moving on with their lives.

After three years, my children were too used to living with my sister and her husband.... For months, my kids couldn't wait to escape from me on the weekends and go back to Aunt Gina,

How much continued contact between birth and resource families after reunification is appropriate?

where they felt more comfortable. I couldn't blame them, but that didn't stop my tears of frustration and pain (Chambers, 2009).

Other Perspectives

It's not only birth parents who have a range of feelings about continued contact: foster parents and the children who have been in foster care do, too. Despite the best preparation and training, the foster parent may have a hard time letting go of the child when the time comes. Or the foster parent may agree with the parent that it's in the best interests of the child for the foster parent to cut back on visits, despite a child's reaction to this.

Other foster children in the foster parent's home may miss those they played with and loved, and want to continue to see the children who have moved back home. Among siblings who have returned home there can be differences in their attachments with foster parents and in their desire to maintain a connection.

What You Can Do

With the varying needs and wishes, how can social workers help families navigate the best course?

- Start early, helping families engage in shared parenting whenever possible prior to reunification.
- Help families and resource families work together to think through and create transition plans at the beginning of the out-of-home placement rather than at the time of reunification (Foster Care Review Inc., 2010).
- Give resource parents concrete ideas for helping children make the transition home.
- Assess on an ongoing basis each person's feelings, needs, and motivations for continuing or ending contact. Find out what is and isn't working. When appropriate, help birth and resource parents set limits.
- Consult with your supervisor during decision-making.

What Resource Parents Can Do

Ways resource parents can support the child's transition home:

- Speak positively about the child's return
- Help plan child's return home
- Include the birth parent in farewell activities
- Provide respite care for parents
- Serve as a part of family's support network after child's return home

Source: Illinois Dept. of Children and Family Services, 2012

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