

Protecting children by preserving their families: a selective research perspective on family reunification ⁽¹⁾

Summary

This paper summarizes selective research initiatives in family reunification by presenting the key themes and issues. Considerable debate prevails regarding practice and policy issues to protect children as well as consider their rights to family of origin connections. Does family reunification work? The answer is a tentative 'yes', for some children and families. Research supports that reunification of children and their families is more likely to succeed when supported by a comprehensive framework of policies, strategies and resources. To further consider the nature of the services necessary and sufficient to assist children and their families in maintaining reunification links, research is needed to specify best practices in this complex area.

1. Introduction

The importance of reunification of children in out-of-home care with their families is recognized as good child care practice and is endorsed by requirements in North American child welfare legislation. In both the United States and Canada, however, family reunification is a controversial and emotional area of child welfare practice. Embedded in child welfare policy is an explicit expectation that child welfare service providers will support parents and communities, even when children may not return to live with them. Family reunification is based on an ideology that evokes arguments and sentiments regarding whether or not children will be adequately protected from the very families who were unable to protect them in the first place. Furthermore, family reunification practices for children who are already in out-of-home care are complex and highly individualized. Reunification efforts can fall short because of scarce resources in terms of practitioner time, skill and beliefs. Children who continue in care without an understanding of their family of origin, or without prior opportunities to maintain links with their family of origin, are also more likely to experience difficulties (Maluccio, Abramczyk & Thomlison, 1996). Yet most children in care typically seek a meaningful contact with family.

In response to issues such as those delineated above, the authors of this paper describe the context of family reunification within the family preservation and permanency planning framework, summarize findings from a selection of current research efforts on family reunification services and identify the issues and implications for research, practice and policy. The background to this paper builds on the authors' North American research and practice interests in permanency planning and family reunification.

2. Definition of family reunification

Family and family reunification connote different meanings to practitioners, children and families. For many, the definition of family reunification continues to signify the re-placement or actual return home of children from foster care and other settings, to their families of origin. That is, to family environments from which they were removed for reasons of abuse, neglect, or parental incompetencies. Given the changing definition of 'family' and the cultural diversity of communities, a broader concept of family reunification and family is necessary. An example is the definition developed by Maluccio, Warsh, and Pine (1993:6): reunification is 'the planned process of reconnecting children in out-of-home care with their families', so as to help them achieve and maintain their optimal level of reconnection - from full reentry of the child into the family system to partial contact or periodic visiting. This definition is both broad and inclusive, but more importantly, it reflects the need to keep families foremost in the lives of children and to include anyone the child thinks of as a family or kinship figure.

3. Context of family reunification

Permanency planning is well established as an ideological and practice framework for the care of children within their families, as well as children in out-of-home care. The related philosophy of family preservation is based on a philosophical and conceptual perspective of the significance of family continuity to the child's development, conviction regarding the child's family as the preferred child rearing unit whenever possible, and the belief that the children's own families provide the potential for good outcomes, provided they receive both the needed and sufficient supports to carry out their functions.

Research underpins the conceptual framework of family reunification. For example, it emphasizes the traumatic and continuing impact of separation of children from their families and communities (Belsky & Nezworski, 1988; Ericksen, Sroufe & Egeland, 1986; Hill & Triseliotis, 1989); process studies have repeatedly found an association between children's early relationship experiences and their later social development (Ericksen, Sroufe & Egeland, 1986; Kufeldt, Armstrong & Dorosh, 1989); the significance of family continuity in the child's socialization process, identity formation, and self-esteem (Hiebert & Thomlison, 1995; Thomlison, 1996; 1995; Thoburn, 1989); and the role of siblings in child development (Hegar, 1988a, 1989b; Staff & Fein, 1992). Although children's growth and developmental difficulties from negative parenting systems can be overcome when they are placed in positive family experiences, out-of-home family care also requires nurturing their affiliation with the family of

origin. This factor assists children to develop a sense of security, self, cultural and family identity important for developmental outcomes.

Family reunification is most often viewed by practitioners for those children who are in out-of-home care on a short-term basis. By contrast, family reunification is seldom addressed in the care plans and practices with children who remain in care for long periods of time, or return to care as the result of adoption breakdowns. Children in long-term care are not always viewed as particularly good candidates for family preservation. Their families often represent failed reunification efforts or unsuccessful intensive home-based services to prevent their children from entering care. Nevertheless, children in out-of-home care typically identify the need to have quality information, contact and other signs of family connections (Warsh, Maluccio & Pine, 1994; Thomlison, 1996). A major role of the practitioner and foster family is to provide leadership to engage and direct the family reunification system and to consider ways of linking children with their larger family systems (Cimmarusti, 1992).

4. Research informing family reunification practice ⁽²⁾

Research and evaluation are taking on increased importance as accountability is emphasized in the human services in general, and child welfare in particular. Information systems are assisting by improving the quality of data which supports researchers as they strive for improved and more stringent methods of studying services to children and families. However, valid, reliable and meaningful child welfare research for practice effectiveness remains an ongoing difficulty. In addition, balancing both child protection issues and family preservation values presents challenges as political and public sentiments are compounded by reduced funding and higher levels of accountability and competing notions as to what families and 'self-reliance' mean. Although research studies suggest that incomplete and inconsistent information is available on family reunification processes and outcomes, policy makers, practitioners, and researchers continue to support the notion that ongoing family contact is beneficial to both parents, family members and children. If we really believe in the intent of the concepts of permanency planning, family preservation and family reunification, a re-examination of efforts to link children in planned, supported ways with their families and communities needs to be emphasized. Family reunification probably continues to be a contentious issue at some level for many practitioners, whereas for the policy maker, family reunification probably makes more sense in that the responsibility for shared parenting while the child remains in care becomes more of a fiscal and political reality. But, what does the research say about the approaches to child and family reunification services?

Below is a brief and descriptive overview of research themes and perspectives relating to the experiences and outcomes of seven recent studies in Great Britain and the United States.

- Reunification rates from 13% to 90% and re-entry rates from 10% to 33% are reported for children in both short and long-term out-of-home care (Davis et al., 1996).

- Factors affecting exit from care are complex, indicating the importance of targeting interventions on the basis of the different types of exit children experience. For example, different interventions are needed for children when they are discharged to a family or guardian or placed for adoption, and for children who keep running away (Courtney & Wong, 1996).
- Intensive and brief family-centered services positively affect reunification rates (Fraser et al, 1996).
- Children were more likely to be reunified when parental visits at the level recommended by the courts occur. However, there is no association between parental visiting and recidivism of reunited children at a 12- month follow-up (Davis et al., 1996).
- Where low levels of both parenting skills and social supports are present, children are more likely to experience reentry into foster care within one year of discharge. The strongest predictor of reentry within two years of discharge is the number and severity of problems experienced by the biological parents or other caregivers (Festinger, 1996).
- Reunification differences were apparent among adolescent children who were removed for reasons of juvenile offenses, and truancy and younger children who were removed because of abuse, neglect or family breakdown; first family reunification attempts were the most successful for both types of children. Second and third reunification attempts had higher rates of failure for both groups. Supportive services play a significant role in the success of reunification efforts (Farmer, 1996).
- Supports from both biological and foster families are important in enhancing the children's sense of belonging and identification with a family unit (Biehal & Wade, 1996).
- Children with behavioral or emotional problems were half as likely to be reunited as children without such problems, even when controlling for background characteristics and type of maltreatment (Landsverk et al., 1996).

The approaches to family reunification in the studies listed above emphasize the importance of family continuity by maintaining relationships with children's biological families, and by recognizing that families may require some form of service directed at both child and family, and their environment. The authors of the studies suggest that further and more rigorous research is needed on family reunification processes and outcomes. The children and families are diverse, and services are indeed varied.

5. Implications for policy and practice

Nevertheless, these are noteworthy implications for policy and practice in child welfare. To begin with, reintegration of a child into a changed family system is a challenge in family reunification practice: the crisis of separation has passed, and both child and family are changed. The child particularly has developed relationships of a positive nature with another family, the foster family, and hence the complexity of making 'room' for the child's biological family network requires a careful integration to sustain the child's affiliations with both families, sense of self and identity. Consequently, practitioners and policy-makers need to demonstrate genuine

respect for the families of the children in care and to seek new ways of assisting the families and relatives in becoming stronger partners and forming workable alliances with child welfare agencies and others in the helping network.

Furthermore, the nature of family support in family reunification is related to issues of family poverty and its associated circumstances, which persist as a barrier to family reunification. Biological families continue to influence children's well-being throughout the care process until exit, when children almost always return home. Thus the role of continuing biological family connections is a *protective* factor in the development of children during care, after care and through life transitions. Nurturing family boundaries is necessary to family system maintenance. Children's outcomes are dependent on their family connections.

Interventions directed to family reunification planning should also be viewed as involving interconnected systems that encompass the individual child, family, and other environments such as school, peers, foster family, siblings and others important to the child. The intervention focus must be redirected from pathology in the child and family to one that is focused on strengths. Family contact is believed to have benefits to parents as well as children. Children are reported to make greater gains in care when their biological family is involved (Maluccio & Whittaker, 1989). Since most children return home when discharged from care, their families should be part of their out-of-home care plan whenever possible. Williams (1995: 39) therefore emphasizes the importance of partnership among children in care with their biological families, their foster families and the child welfare agencies or authorities as 'a relationship with the local social services department through which parents and children feel that they are empowered in three ways: they feel that they are fully informed about the services available to them; they feel that they participate fully in decision-making around their own lives; and they feel satisfied that their needs are being met in a dignified way.

The following implications emerge from related research:

- reunification happens; it is the *norm*, therefore attending to how it happens should be a major practice issue;
- out-of-home care should be viewed as a period for both child and family work; it is important to work with the family during the placement period, providing supports before and after reunification and encouraging and facilitating child-family visiting throughout the placement;
- visitation/family contact is a persistent theme, and is one factor over which the worker has some control; maintaining family continuity for children and youths during their out-of-home placement and separation from biological families begins at the point of separation;
- providing brief, intensive family-centered services is essential to maintain the reunification;
- there needs to be an understanding of the role of the child's emotional and behavioral problems in reunification decisions, along with the need to help parents to address their issues when children are reunified; and
- not all families benefit equally from services; assessing the patterns of family relationships and the quality of informal supports and their significance for young people leaving foster care can enhance preparation for transition for independent living;

- it is important to focus on maximizing child and family participation in the helping process as a regular component in decision making and planning toward the goal of family preservation.

Above all, the studies suggest that return home should always be viewed as a primary goal for children in out-of-home care. If return home is not possible, the possibilities for reconnections and family links are considered along the family reunification continuum (Maluccio, Warsh & Pine, 1993). Problems in returning children home are generally not associated with the length of the separation from family but with the age of the child and quality of the helping services. Therefore, visiting activities and services matched to the developmental levels of children and their families is necessary (Maluccio, Warsh & Pine, 1993).

Results from current research also suggest that programs to promote family reunification can be an effective way to enhance children's sense of family and personal identity, improve family functioning and develop security. In addition, policy frameworks need to review the guidelines for reunification and, perhaps, legislation needs to embody an expanded role for children's family networks, even while they remain in-care. Family reunification approaches need to be viewed from a preventive intervention framework as well. In other words, to minimize risk of socio-behavioral, cultural and psychological difficulties in learning and living, family reunification initiatives may play a protective role in the development or promotion of resilience in children during their out-of-home care experience (Kinard, 1995; Thomlinson, in press). Initiatives such as family group decision-making conferences may also be a helpful component of family reunification practice at various key points in the process of assessment, planning and the continuing out-of-home care of children. Keeping children connected to biological roots may also be served in 'open-care' arrangements for some children and families who, for various reasons, are unable or unwilling to provide the ongoing nurturing (Millham, Bullock, Hosie, Haak, 1986; Pinkerton, 1994).

6. Research agenda

Although the state of knowledge and scholarship about family reunification is increasing, it remains notable for what is not known and, to a certain extent, remains controversial. While it should be recognized that research in children's services has some unique considerations and problems, gaps in research include: (1) the need to identify strategies to achieve the best practices for family reunification; (2) the importance of identifying what services are *necessary* and whether they are *sufficient* for that individual child and family to have a successful outcome, and (3) the need for better information about the similarities and differences among children in their responses to different reunification interventions and over time.

In the United States and Canada there is increasing pressure from funders, policy-makers and other providers to select interventions that are empirically documented, time-limited, and cost-effective. However, given the inherent risks in family reunification practice, such services must not simply be driven by cost-effectiveness or the need to reduce the numbers of children in care. A research agenda must also be based on a commitment to measurement, research,

and evaluation. In addition, a research agenda is framed by two further issues. First, there is a need for improving the quality of data in child welfare services; and second, the best family reunification practices must subscribe to the value of using carefully defined and collected information to assist in meaningful clinical and research data. To date, the majority of research has relied on measures of process by which services are delivered rather than outcomes achieved for children and families. Process measures are helpful in describing programs but less helpful in learning about effectiveness of the interventions used. Therefore, efforts to measure the level of change in functioning and behavior patterns achieved by children from the time of entry to care, during and after services is critical, along with measurement of change in parental and family functioning.

Longitudinal perspectives on children's outcomes in reunification are also crucial. This also implies gathering consistent data over time, with a prospective focus, obtained as unobtrusively as possible, and culturally appropriate. Measures selected for assessment, monitoring and evaluation need to reflect multiple perspectives and life domains of the child. A good example of this is the British study *Going Home* (Bullock, Little & Millham, 1993), which shows the patterns of services, quality and costs from various perspectives.

Does family reunification service work?' The answer is a tentative 'Yes, for some of the children we think it does'. Few of the studies noted in this paper have used comparison groups, and there is limited use of standardized indicators of progress or other outcome-related criteria. Generalizations cannot be made, but it is necessary to define specific features of interventions, such as types of child designated for service, follow-up indicators and theoretical framework to be employed, requirements of service and larger samples. The following are some questions for further research.

1. What is necessary in terms of the nature of supports to parents in connection with visiting?
2. What services are necessary to children and families following reunification?
3. For what population of children or youths does family reunification work best?
4. Are there more or fewer benefits in family reunification for some children at different points in their lives?
5. What are the most effective strategies for specific populations (eg. race, ethnicity, younger-older children, neglected, sexually abused and others) that should be utilized by practitioners?
6. What are the critical factors that promote family connections and the effectiveness of reunification? For example, changes in family circumstances, attitudes of family members and/or practitioners, types of visitation patterns.
7. What intensity and duration of services is needed to produce positive outcomes?
8. What roles(s) can foster parents play in reunification? Is there a continuing supportive or other role for foster parents after reunification?
9. What does the concept of family connections or inclusive care mean for children who continue to live in foster care?

7. Conclusion

Public support for family reunification is embraced through principles of good child care, but somehow the practice context has been slow to catch up with the continuum of family preservation. If we wish to assist children and families in reunification efforts, it is important to acknowledge that sustained attention to the many concrete and instrumental needs of some families is necessary. Moreover, foster parents, social workers, and researchers need to identify the full range of practices to support children and families in maintaining and promoting their connections. In addition, child welfare authorities are not completely supportive of the economic aspects of family reunification.

Moreover, family reunification as a philosophy and concept should affect the way in which we work together with foster parents, children and biological parents throughout the care process. In other words, it suggests new partnerships among the key players. These principles place a new and more encompassing emphasis on practice. Practitioners and policy-makers need to enhance their efforts to understand the importance and value of quality child and family information, partnerships, sharing parental responsibilities and demonstrating respect. Such efforts may result in a more positive approach to all. Respectfulness may be the key (Pinker-ton, 1994). Will this lead to a more positive outcome for children? At the very least, these could be the beginning of another paradigm shift in theory and methods of working for the best outcomes for children and their families. Such a paradigm could reflect a new vision for the welfare of children and families - a vision in which family reunification is a central and lasting component for children's services.

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Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 5th EUSARF Congress, Action for Families, linking research, practice and policy across Europe, London England, September 12 - 15, 1996.
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